



SIKANDER

"...a journey worth taking."

DUANE EVANS, Former CIA Officer,
Author of *North from Calcutta*

With foreword by
AKBAR AHMED
Author of
*Journey Into America:
The Challenge of Islam*



M. Salahuddin Khan

SIKANDER

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By

M. Salahuddin Khan

Fourth American Electronic Edition

July 2012



KARAKORAM PRESS, Lake Forest, IL

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In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Caring

*To “human beings,” wherever they may yet remain,
To the ones whose humanity has withstood conflict,
To the nameless victims of warfare whose individual
human stories fail to command media attention,*

and

To the memory of my ever-loving parents.

M. Salahuddin Khan

Preface

Whether we like it or not we live in a complex and dangerous world in which cultures often brush against each other. Diasporas (used generically here) and migrations fuel such effects and the assumptions grounded in one culture frequently fall apart when naïvely applied to another. I'm a product of a diaspora. I was born in Pakistan. I moved to England at the age of four, spending the next thirty-two years growing up and receiving an education there. In 1988 I moved to the United States. From my earliest years, I've found myself thrust into an outsider's perspective of never quite belonging to the place where I've lived.

Sikander is a human story. It follows a young man's coming of age and subsequent growth through adversity. He finds himself more than once having to deal with loss, which brings him to the recognition of the ultimate and relative value of his own humanity and his relationships with people.

Sikander is a citizen of the species. He belongs nowhere in particular and everywhere in general. In spirit, he transcends cultures while being a product of his native culture. *Sikander's* religion is a matter-of-fact aspect of daily life, informing decisions from the mundane to the seismic. Being a part of his daily existence, his religion is neither hanging in a closet only to be worn on Fridays, nor is it a manic permanent resident of his frontal lobes.

Sikander immerses the reader into the "ordinary" nature of most of the world's routinely lived Islam, which is far removed from the misconceptions sadly prevalent in much of the non-Muslim world. The story does not, however, intend an apologist perspective. Neither does it suggest that we have a simple "east-versus-west" narrative to consider. It simply takes us into the ordinary lives of everyday Muslims while allowing us to be aware of the textured, varied, and nuanced hues of such life from rural Afghanistan to urban Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, for diaspora Muslims in the USA. All of this is still within the mainstream camp, without venturing into radical or heretical renditions of the religion, which also obviously exist.

Sikander's personal growth as a man involves working through some of these cultural differences in the practice of mainstream Islam and the conflicts between it and the "fringes" of the religion without making him be a religious fanatic of any stripe while doing so.

An additional theme has been to examine the veneer-like quality of what we call civilization. Seen frontally, it projects depth and substance and seeming durability. We use words like "institution" to help us consolidate such sensibilities into our collective psyche. But turned on its side it reveals its true lack of depth and fragility. After all, civilization has only existed for a few millennia, which is but the blink of an eye against the vast ocean of time that has shaped *homo sapiens*, the animal that lies beneath. We should not be surprised to see how readily any human being is capable of descent into unfettered inhumanity, under the sanction of higher authority. It also reminds us why we have governments, laws and rules and why "minor" losses of liberty, while alluring in their promise of safeguarding physical security, can so often lead ultimately to disaster, and in a very real sense, increase the risks to physical security.

In *Sikander* I also wanted to weave the thread of an individual life through the fabric of world events that shape it. When today we hear about casualties and soldiers' tragic deaths in conflicts such as the post-9/11 Afghanistan war or Iraq, the human-interest focus is upon the lives and families of the fallen. We want to know what defined them as people, how they grew up, their military career, family and so on. All these things quite properly help us to look into their essential humanity and feel empathy for such a tragic loss. *Sikander* has been squarely aimed at doing something similar but from the viewpoint of the equally ordinary people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, whose lives have been touched by conflict and its fallout, but whose deaths are sadly often just statistics, too numerous to warrant individual attention. The story attempts to remind us to re-examine how this rendering of "otherness" upon such lives causes us to fail to see *their* no-less-essential humanity.

I would also like to clarify that the story's setting in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the USA is secondary to its core focus being that of an examination of human nature and behavior across the boundaries between cultures. For a sense of realism, much effort went into researching historical events and the geography of the regions involved. This does not make the book a work of reference about either the events or the geography. The purpose of the research was to provide as realistic a context for the narrative as possible. But at the end of the day, it's a work of fiction. As for a source on the nature of Afghan and Pakistani culture, I would like to believe that the included glossary is both accurate and substantive and would strongly recommend the interested reader study its contents.

As a convenience, this fourth electronic edition incorporates all maps into the body of the text and hyperlinks ethnic words from the narrative directly to the respective Glossary page. It has also been rewritten to render the original edition's telling of the story in fewer words and to improve readability without compromising either the literary style or the scope and reach of the narrative.

A word about spelling and pronunciations. *Sikander* is written so that pronunciations made by non-native speakers are spelled accordingly. A good illustration is "Qunduz" versus "Kundooz." Please take the time to examine the glossary, which provides not only meanings and context but also some guidance on pronunciations

I hope you enjoy the story.

Foreword

In these times of suspicion of Muslims, fiction can play a key role in humanizing people to one another. While it is rare for Americans to see Muslims even on television for a few minutes at a time, works of literature or film by Muslims are even rarer. This is unfortunate because novels especially can be instrumental in opening up other worlds to the reader, and in our interconnected world, such cross-cultural explorations, especially where Islam is concerned, are of utmost necessity. In this, a novel can succeed in humanizing an “other” where even the best-intentioned analysis lets us down—witness, for example, the huge impact that Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* had on American readers during the Civil Rights era.

It is because of this power of literature, and the dearth of visible Muslims in America producing such works, that I was so enthused to hear of *Sikander*. Finally, a South Asian *Gone with the Wind*, with the sweep of history and a plot ripped out of today’s headlines in locales about which so many wish to learn. Pulling no punches and written in a western literary style, the book provides a clear and balanced perspective about the turbulent pathology of America’s relationship with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and with Islam. The narrative is firmly planted in the native cultures of the region and presents a journey through Afghanistan’s recent past, from the Soviet occupation to the present.

When I traveled across America in 2008-2009 for my book *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* many Americans told me they had never met a Muslim. Many wanted to learn about Muslim culture and society, they said, but did not feel they had a way to do so. *Sikander* fills this void. Reading *Sikander*, non-Muslim Americans will find a great deal of relatable common ground—reading about characters who experience happiness, sadness, aspirations, fears, that have hopes and dreams.

In addition, *Sikander* provides a fascinating window into a tribal culture where Americans are so involved but understand so little, the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Readers are given a deep immersion into this other world in which, through Khan’s extraordinary techniques, “they” become “us.” We are taken into the minds of Afghan and Pakistani Muslim characters and are denied the comfortable point of view of “spectator.” We are no longer "watching" the movie, we're in it. Aside from being entertaining, *Sikander* is engaging and thought provoking. It explores many human themes including coming of age, prejudice, misunderstanding and being misunderstood, family values, and the differences in culture and mentality between America and the Muslim world.

Sikander has deservedly been awarded many distinctions, including the Grand Prize in Fiction at the Los Angeles Book Festival 2010, the Grand Prize and top Fiction title at the Paris Book Festival 2011, and the winner of the multicultural fiction category at the 2011 National Indie Excellence Book Awards.

I commend Salahuddin Khan for writing this excellent, pathbreaking book. He is at the peak of his professional career and ideally placed to contribute as he has. The stakes in terms of understanding between the US and the Muslim world and specifically the US and Afghanistan and Pakistan could not be higher. This book is an important tool to bring this about and it needs to be widely read and discussed.

Professor Akbar Ahmed
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Akbar Ahmed is currently the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, American University in Washington, D.C., the First Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the US Naval Academy, Annapolis, and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is considered “the world’s leading authority on contemporary Islam” by the BBC.

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed has advised world leaders including most recently General David Petraeus, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Secretary Michael Chertoff on Islam and foreign policy. He is regularly interviewed by CNN, CBS, BBC, and Fox News and has appeared several times on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Daily Show*.

He is the author of over a dozen award-winning books, including *Discovering Islam* (the basis for the BBC six-part TV series entitled *Living Islam*) and *Journey into Islam*; his books have been translated into many languages, including Chinese and Indonesian. His latest project based in extensive fieldwork has resulted in a full length documentary, *Journey into America*, which has been shown at several film festivals and the book, *Journey into America: the Challenge of Islam* (Brookings Press, June 2010).

He joined the Civil Service of Pakistan and held important posts in Pakistan and Bangladesh—including Commissioner, Quetta; Political Agent, South Waziristan Agency. He has also been the Ambassador from Pakistan to the UK.

Ambassador Ahmed is one of the world’s foremost anthropologists and was inducted into the legendary figures in Anthropology’s Hall of Fame as part of the “Anthropological Ancestors” audio-visual interview series at Cambridge University in July 2004. He has written extensively on the tribal areas of Pakistan, including his book *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (1983), and the anthropology of Muslim societies. His most recent projects have been unprecedented large-scale anthropological studies and as one Harvard intellectual noted, he is “changing the face of anthropology.”

A prolific author, he is also a playwright and three of his plays were staged in the DC area: *Noor*, *The Trial of Dara Shikoh*, and *From Waziristan to Washington: A Muslim at the Crossroads*. Two plays, *Noor*, and *The Trial of Dara Shikoh*, were published by Saqi Books in the summer of 2009.

Ambassador Ahmed has also been a leader in interfaith dialogue and tries to build bridges between civilizations. Along with Judea Pearl, father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl he has had public dialogues in an effort to dispel hate and ignorance. For their efforts they were awarded the prestigious Purpose Prize in 2007. Ambassador Ahmed was also the recipient of the first Gandhi Center Fellowship of Peace Award in 2004.

October, 2011

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Chapter 1

Difficult Times

ALREADY LOW IN THE northwestern sky, the late August sun set ablaze with its grand and orange entrance the previously gray walls of Aftab's classroom. Sharp contrasts from the starkly lit scene outside drew the attention of two of his students seated nearest the windows. University Public School was about to conclude its very first week after the long summer break and lingering memories of recent freedom left the boys struggling to pay attention. The bell would be launching the weekend that Thursday afternoon and almost everyone fidgeted in anticipation of its metallic trill. They were, however, in no doubt. Until it rang, Aftab would allow no acknowledgment of the approaching end of class.

Mister Aftab to his students, his job was to teach them English and the ability to interpret English literature. For this term it was to be Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Having begun the term the prior Sunday, Aftab intended a weeklong reading followed by critical analysis over the subsequent weeks, but despite plans to cover one act per day, he had yet to reach the fourth. Now slipping behind and with the week's final minutes evaporating, it was no small frustration for Aftab to have to deal with inattentive students staring out of his window.

Though frail and some might say, soft-spoken, Aftab had an icy will. His "no," was the end of any discussion. Discipline was important and he always intervened at the first sign of it slipping. Inevitably, he launched into the distracted duo, the disinterested Hamid Anwar Haque and the distant Sikander [Khan](#).



“Sikander, pay attention...if you please!” Aftab called out, simultaneously casting a modest scowl—whose purpose was immediately served—toward Hamid. Aftab’s intervention skillfully combined demand and plea. As the boys were army brats or the children of wealthy Peshawar business families, teachers could ill afford to risk parental complaints about their harshness and the near certain dismissal that would result.

Sikander had been peering at the flow of traffic on Peshawar’s Grand Trunk Road beyond the north playground a hundred meters from the window. Incessant horn-blowing and [rickshaw](#)-buzzing had become a focus of distraction for his daydreaming yet troubled mind; a reverie from which Aftab’s rebuke had rudely awoken him.

“Sorry, Mr. Aftab...sir.” Sikander’s lips apologized even as his eyes betrayed an adolescent bravado. An independent-minded young man, he was buoyed by his family’s standing and it didn’t hurt that at almost eighteen, he was already a physically imposing [Pathan](#). Justifiably self-assured with his English skills, he had comfortably allowed his attention to drift away from Aftab’s lesson.

“Now,” Aftab resumed, reassembling his thoughts, “before coming back on Sunday, read through the fourth act, and pay special attention to the quarrel and reconciliation between Brutus and Cassius.”

Shakespeare’s feuding characters were far from Sikander’s thoughts. His attention drifted back to the scene outside the dusty windowpane. He yearned to leave Pakistan; to see more of the world, and was sure that someday he would. His patience, however, was no match for his certainty.

Was it really just three weeks ago? Sikander closed his eyes. He used the sounds from the road outside to dub the memories of the trip taken with his brother, Jamil, and their father, Javed, during summer break.

Magical Dubai! A slow motion explosion of concrete and glittering glass, it had been giddy. Everything about it was so unlike Pakistan. But now he was back and felt as if he’d peered into paradise through its windows and been told to move along. Still, his passport, from which he had become inseparable, provided some consolation. He could at least take the occasional peek at the newly-acquired stamps and kindle dreams of more to come.

Beyond the pleasant memories, however, something deeper stirred. Sikander was troubled by his difficulties with Javed. To be sure, there was much about his father to respect; even admire. After all, Javed had built a successful business from the humble electrical parts store started by his own father not long after [Partition](#). But for Sikander, nothing he could say or do ever seemed to earn Javed’s respect and often sparked the opposite effect. Most recently, filled with enthusiasm from the Dubai trip and the hint of involvement in the business it implied, Sikander had an idea for improving the way in which goods were stored and retrieved in their small warehouse and had suggested it to Javed upon their return.

Like many fathers, however, Javed gave little credence to his son’s inexperienced offerings. Worse still, his ridiculing the proposal as naïve had been in front of Sikander’s mother, Sofie, and fifteen-year-old Jamil. The dismissive snickering, the witnesses, and Sikander’s own adolescent convulsions, led him to fume silently. But culture and religion ruled out wanton displays of frustration to parents.

Sikander’s effort to repress his sulking was not entirely successful. It irked Javed sufficiently to provoke a slap on his son’s mop of hair, along with a simple “get over it.” Compounding his irritation had been the scolding Javed received from Sofie for his earlier ridicule of her firstborn. She had yet to learn of the slapping incident.

To Sikander, his father’s dismissal of his views typified their exchanges, not least of which, were during their frequent arguments over Afghanistan.

As far as Sikander was concerned, providing refuge to Afghans was all very well and certainly more needed to be done, but without stepping up military support, the Soviets would never leave.

Javed didn’t share his son’s perspective. What could Sikander truly know of the world? He wasn’t even twelve when the Russians had invaded. Javed was in no doubt. Despite the undeniable benefit to his own business from their presence, the Afghans had been given too much freedom to wander around Pakistan and his beloved country was now awash with drugs and weapons, straining its already fragile social fabric. For Javed, President Zia-ul-Haque had been myopic about the consequences of his policies and should have imposed more restrictions on the refugees. Sikander’s views merely hardened his opinions.

Now, unless Sikander’s mind was fully occupied, he invariably returned to struggling with his father’s reluctance to acknowledge the obvious. Sikander had become an adult.

The bell rang. Sikander returned to the moment, awaiting only Aftab’s permission like the rest of his classmates before heading for the door. Aftab took his seat, pausing as he always did before any pronouncement. Finally, in a firm but amused tone he proclaimed, “Hence! Home, you idle creatures get you home!” quoting from *Caesar* while peering over the rims of his eyeglasses, which clung precariously to the end of his nose. The hint of a smile flickered on his lips as he gazed upon the class of ‘88 filing out of his doorway.

“Hamid!” bellowed Sikander. “[Yaar](#), I have to get home quickly. We’re at my aunt’s this evening and I’m losing time to get ready. Come *on*!” More urgent than enthusiastic, Sikander’s tone betrayed his desire to avoid further trouble at home.

“Coming!” Hamid replied, struggling to snap the padlock on his locker and catch up with his friend.

Hamid’s ambition was simple. Getting a Pakistani Air Force commission after high school was the only thing he cared about. As if to telegraph this, he had begun cultivating the wisps of a square mustache, emulating the look that had become popular among PAF pilots.

Sikander and Hamid had been friends since Hamid’s family had moved into the area just three years earlier. The easygoing Hamid was generally happy to follow Sikander, a safe bet in the unlikely event of an encounter with bullies. The two families interacted on friendly enough terms and though the fathers were simply acquaintances, the mothers were the best of friends.

Hamid had done very little over the summer break. He was keen to continue hearing about Sikander’s experiences of Dubai. It would pass the time during the walk, and Sikander was happy to oblige. Chatting as they strolled briskly toward and into the peaceful precincts of Hayatabad, they finally parted company at Hamid’s house, leaving Sikander the short walk to his own home.

A large, cream stucco wall defined its outer perimeter. Behind the wall, the building grew like a giant redbrick tree, with its upper floors overhanging the lower ones. The dwelling was arranged with a front block facing the road and a rear U-shaped courtyard, flanked on the upper floors by the family’s bedrooms. In other respects it was not especially different from any well-to-do Pakistani home.

Hayatabad was a better suburb than most. But as with all cities in Pakistan, the tranquility and structure within the boundary walls of most of its homes contrasted sharply with the ill-managed and chaotic nature of anything within the purview of the municipality. It was why the homes had boundary walls at all, and why they stood so high. In the middle of the front wall, the black metal gate was wide enough to admit a vehicle, and in one of its halves, a second hinged door-within-a-door allowed for convenient pedestrian access.

Sikander waited after pressing the door buzzer. There was more calm and quiet than usual. Impatiently, he buzzed again, for longer this time.

Jamil was home. His classes had finished earlier that day, so he came to let his brother in. Sikander brushed past him, heading directly for his room. Attempting to follow him, Jamil seemed to want to say something but before he could, Sikander cut him off, muttering, “Can’t chat now,” as he raced upstairs. He entered his bedroom, dropped his satchel on the bed, and began changing into the dressy [qamees](#) and [shalwar](#) that would be needed for the evening’s visit to his aunt’s.

The hurried buttoning of his [qamees](#) was arrested, however, when he heard sobbing. There weren’t any young children in the house so it was hardly a common occurrence. Completing his change of clothes, Sikander followed the sound as it became louder and more familiar, leading him downstairs into the kitchen. Sofie was the one crying.

Ordinarily, Sofie was comfortable as the one in charge of things, but there were vulnerable areas of her psyche, and whatever it was at this moment had plainly assailed some of them. Facing her from across the kitchen table with his elbow firmly planted on it and his chin on the palm of his hand was Javed.

Sikander reflexively muttered the customary “[Assalaamu ‘alaykum!](#)” though it was clear he wasn’t about to receive the customary reply. His father briefly glanced at him, dismissively, as far as Sikander was willing to interpret. His mother, after pausing to see her son, returned to her lament with renewed purpose. His presence underscored the challenges she was processing. Unable to contain himself, Sikander turned to his father, more curious than distraught.

“What? What happened?”

Sikander was concerned that the problem might once again be related to the business. He didn’t want to be drawn into making yet another “foolish” suggestion.

“It’s the business,” uttered Javed. “We’ve taken a hit from one of our suppliers. With all our past dealings, I... They’ve always been straight with me. I never expected *this* problem. *Never.*” He said, shaking his head.

Still wary of leaping to a misguided grasp of the issue, Sikander continued, “What kind of problem?”

“Five million! I’m out five million rupees!” Javed sighed, barely able to contain the lump in his throat. “The Kabeers in Dubai. I’d given them a large payment for some heavy-duty motors. Huh! Borrowed most of it.”

Such transactions normally went through bank letters of credit. However, when Javed was in Dubai, the Kabeers offered him a large shipment of the hard-to-obtain motors to come to him directly from Taiwan. They were willing to make the deal with an extra eight percent discount, but only if he paid them first by direct wire transfer. Having dealt with the Kabeers for years he had looked them in the eye, given them his trust, and accepted their terms. He had been mistaken.

The Kabeer Brothers Trading Company had been a longtime supplier of electrical products, bringing items in from other parts of the world to the free port of Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates. From there, shipments could efficiently be broken down and sent to nearby countries without incurring local taxes. But internal sales in the Emirates *were* taxable and the Kabeers had evaded paying them. Now that the local police was seeking the brothers, any hopes of recovering Javed’s money were dashed. In 1986, the amount came to more than three hundred thousand U.S. dollars, which was a large enough figure to demand unpleasant consequences in their lives; consequences that were for Sofie, inescapably imaginable.

“So, how are we handling it?” Sikander asked.

“Hm! Wish I knew!” Javed replied, avoiding eye contact with his son.

An extended family might have been helpful at a time like this, but Javed was an only child. His cousins lived in Lahore and Rawalpindi and they hadn’t been in touch for years. Sofie’s sister, Naghma, and brother-in-law, Nadeem were wealthy landowners. But they were far too aloof and full of themselves, as far as Javed was concerned. He’d die before asking for *their* support and certainly not for such an embarrassing problem. “We’ll have to sell things,” he muttered. “Including the house.”

Sikander’s friendships, schooling, career, and any number of other aspects of his life would be devastated. Something *had* to be done. But what? It didn’t occur to him that his father might already have considered all the obvious things, when Sikander allowed his thoughts to spill onto his lips. “How about collecting from people who owe us? Economize, maybe? Sell just a few—”

“Of course! But it won’t be enough,” snapped his father. It was the tone of wearied exasperation, usually reserved for well meaning but ill-considered offerings of the “How can I help?” variety. Sikander understood that he had probably pushed far enough, for now at least. [Pathans](#) were naturally irascible.

Knowing that Javed had been forced to abandon school to support Sikander’s grandfather in a business crisis, Sikander was keenly aware of the same possibility befalling him. It would save money. It would thrust him into the business, and that would be that as far as hopes of leaving the country, and studying in America were concerned.

Footsteps echoing in the hallway broke into his thoughts. Glancing behind him, Sikander saw Jamil and Sameena, their thirteen year-old sister, leaving the staircase as they approached the kitchen. They stopped at the kitchen doorway, hesitant to enter. For them the situation was grave only because their parents’ faces said so. They had little grasp of it but were old enough to be denied the blissful ignorance available to infants. Their worries added fuel to Sikander’s urge to do something.

“If we don’t come up with a solution then... [Ya Allah!](#) It’ll mean an auction,” bemoaned Sofie. “We won’t be able to live anywhere near here!”

Each wave of imagined consequence came crashing into her troubled consciousness, bearing its own particular brutality. She struggled to hold herself together.

Javed continued to scour his mind for options, occasionally coming up with something that might work, only to realize a moment later its fatal flaw before moving on to the next futile idea. Between attempts, mortified by his own stupidity in trusting the Kabeers, he struggled to evict from his mind the persistent image of a jackass.

For now, however, it would mean wearing a brave face, negotiating their way through this, selling whatever made sense to liquidate, and trying to find for themselves a new, more lightweight existence; at least until things improved. Javed also knew that Sofie could be strong once she quieted down and took a moment to focus on immediate practicalities. She was better with adversity than uncertainty and needed time to work things out in her mind. Her waves became ripples and the crying reduced to a snuffle as the normally steely Sofie began to emerge.

“Well,” she sighed, cocking an eyebrow and staring through the marble floor in front of her, “we’ll have to start organizing what has to be done. Going to Naghma’s right now isn’t a good idea. I’ll call her.” She arose, reflexively adjusted her [dupattha](#), and drifted off to the lounge to make the call.

Javed turned to the children. “Look, for now, let’s avoid the long faces. Try to behave normally and pray for the family. Okay? We might work something out so let’s just...wait and see.”

More demand than encouragement, thought Sikander. With a nod and having little else to do, he went to his room. *Act normal*, he mused cynically

as his gaze wandered, landing eventually on the satchel still lying on his bed. *Homework.*

After changing into simpler clothes, he lay on the bed with his Shakespeare open and thumbed through to the fourth act. Despite his strength in English, his arcane language was heavy going, but before long, he came to: *There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.*

Sikander mouthed the words silently as a smile flickered on his lips. He recognized them as one of Mr. Aftab's many favored sayings. Along with the new realization of their origin, the words resonated with him and made him think about life's turning points, and how the present circumstances were about as easy to imagine being a turning point as any. Maybe at this moment he was supposed to be heading in a different direction. The family's misfortune might simply be the trigger; the flood tide of destiny urging his life's boat to venture forward and be launched into it.

Only a matter of time before they pull me from this expensive school, he thought, returning to more pedestrian concerns. He tried imagining leaving school and minding the ordinary affairs of the business while his father focused on extinguishing the financial fire. There was little point in his worrying about that crisis. But taking the burden of routine business off Javed's shoulders? That was surely a different matter.

There's less than two years of school to go anyway, he justified. *I could always return. Once we're back on our feet.* But the sinking feeling of inevitable setback was quick to engulf him. He'd be resuming classes with more junior boys in the school. His present class fellows would be out in the world pursuing careers while he still had another year, perhaps more, in front of him. Hamid would be in the PAF and no doubt flying jets, or learning how. As one thought drifted into the next, Sikander drifted into sleep.

Leading the rising sun by about an hour, the [azaan](#) came blaring over the loudspeakers that Friday morning. In the greater Peshawar area, with its densely concentrated mosques, [azaans](#) could be heard approaching from the east, each three-minute recitation overlapping the next in a growing westbound sonic montage. Most locals were already awake from the earlier, more distant calls when the nearby Zarghooni [Masjid's](#) loudspeakers dutifully burst into their particular rendition for Hayatabad. The soundscape meanwhile marched on, mosque after mosque, progressively fading into the west, given chase by the sun.

After rising and performing [fajr](#), Sikander returned to bed. He was tired and there were still a couple of good sleep hours left of the morning.

Shafts of sunlight streamed through large gaps in the drapes. As the light fell on his eyes, Sikander stirred. The normal feeling of ease associated with any Muslim Friday-to-Saturday weekend greeted him at first, but it did not take long for the pressing reality of the previous evening to surface in his mind. After a pensive breakfast, Sikander continued his homework before preparing for [Jumma](#).

As they left the Zarghooni after [Jumma](#), taking Sikander with him, Javed began the firefighting task in earnest. Initially, they took to the roads of Peshawar, going from one customer's home to the next. It didn't help that Javed was bothering them on a weekend. In some cases, nothing was actually due and in others he was really asking for an advance on trust for the next ninety days of supplies. At best, Javed could identify commitments for a million rupees though he knew it probably wouldn't all materialize. Depression threatened as the day wore on and nothing meaningful seemed to emerge. The more Javed struggled, the more stressed he became, further jeopardizing his ability to smooth talk the next person.

Looking on, Sikander felt thoroughly helpless. It was hard to watch what was happening, and feeling his own inability to affect the situation, he just wanted to get away. After exhausting local possibilities, they came home so that Javed could begin making calls throughout the country to people who owed him.

Sikander walked over to Hamid's and swearing his friend to secrecy, let him know most of what had happened. Hamid became visibly troubled.

"That's *serious*, [yaar](#). Where will you all go? And what about school?"

"No idea," Sikander replied, as he held a weary shrug.

Neither Sikander nor Hamid realized that Hamid's sister, Rashida, had been coming quietly barefoot downstairs before picking up the conversation at just the point where it seemed appropriate not to reveal her presence. Rashida was thirteen; too young to understand how lives can be transformed by indiscretion and too old to let an interesting neighborhood fact go to waste.

Later that evening, Rashida let her mother, Rubina, know what she had heard about the [Khans](#) having to move and possibly being in trouble. Concerned, Rubina pondered what to do. Her family was relatively well off and they might be able to help. But with Sofie having shared nothing with her as yet, guile would be needed to uncover the truth without needless embarrassment.

By Saturday morning, with only an inkling of the problem facing the [Khans](#)—certainly no idea of its scale—Rubina resolved that it would be unacceptable for the [Khan](#) family to have to move without so much as a finger lifted by their friends. She donned her [dupattha](#) and a light [jilbab](#) and strolled over to Sofie's home. The [Khans'](#) maidservant, Sairah, let her in, and after the customary [salaams](#), Rubina and Sofie sat in the living room engaging in mundane conversation.

As they chatted, Sofie managed to hide her inner feelings well and Rubina almost felt that perhaps the whole story was one of Rashida's not uncommon embellishments of something innocuous. It would be awkward for Rubina to reveal her awareness of a problem that might have been blown out of proportion. After a second cup of green tea, she launched into her mission.

"Sofie?" she began cheerily. "I uh, was thinking we might go into Peshawar and shop at the Meena Bazaar. Maybe after that go to Andarshah? I've heard some new jewelry's arrived for this weekend. We could check it out; maybe get something nice for our girls' [jahez](#), and you know it's always fun to bargain those poor jewelers down to the bone!" she chuckled.

Sofie didn't flinch. Neither an eyebrow twitch, nor the wavering of a corner of her mouth would be allowed to expose her inner tumult.

She beamed. "Rubina, there's *never* a bad time to shop. Give me a minute to take care of my hair and put something on." The part of her that loved to haggle—especially for jewelry—was in any case engaged, so the bluff was no real challenge. Her more deeply troubled self had formed a strategy. In front of Rubina, she would feign dissatisfaction, offer an insightful critique, or haggle for unacceptable terms with shopkeepers. The act would have to be convincing.

Sofie hurried to the refuge of her room. Sitting in front of her mirror, she fought to compose herself. She was a slim woman, regal in appearance, and held her head just a little higher than might seem natural, a reaction to a sense of inferiority from marrying a nouveau-not-so-riche husband.

Brushing her hair, she briefly lost herself in the anticipation of enjoying a little shopping company with Rubina. The moment passed. The brush paused. New tears began welling up as thoughts of how she would be deceiving her friend overwhelmed her. Years of social interaction had given her the ability to put on her guard when needed. Ashamed of having to invoke the skill once more, she forced herself to mop her cheeks and repair the makeup.

Her mask finally ready, Sofie returned to Rubina, put on her [jilbab](#), and ushered her friend to their Corolla. Jehangir, the [Khans'](#) driver, took them to

the bustling Meena Bazaar on the east side of Peshawar.

As they browsed the newly arrived and attractive fabrics, Rubina remained watchful of Sofie's willingness to spend, but at no time did Sofie oblige her friend with such a revelation. Some fabrics were too bright, some too dull, and yes, others too expensive, but nothing was said out of the ordinary. Sofie also managed to put in about the right number of smiles and frowns as well as pretending to yearn the occasional item, haggling intensely for it, only to reject it when the seller refused her impossible demands.

After a lunch break and short drive, they were among the jewelry stores at Andarshah. Continuing her act, at times Sofie offered words of encouragement to Rubina to go ahead and buy some bangle or necklace but refrained from doing so herself. The trip would at least seem worthwhile for Rubina and if pressed, Sofie would blame her reluctance to buy on mood, headache, or having failed to see any "must-buy" items.

After returning to Sofie's home, aware that her ploy had failed, Rubina decided to take a different path. With the last of her shopping bags removed from the car, she joined her friend in the living room. Sairah carried in a tray of tea and set it down on the finely carved wood and glass coffee table. As they sipped, Rubina looked down, shook her head slightly, and chuckled.

"What?" asked Sofie, frowning with a curious smile.

"Oh. It's uh... It's nothing" dismissed Rubina.

"Rubina? What's up?" pressed Sofie, sensing possible mischief but maintaining an air of joviality.

"Well," began Rubina, "it's funny really. You know, I heard something from Rashida yesterday and I couldn't... Well, I just couldn't imagine it being true."

"Really? What?" Sofie asked, drawn away from her present worries.

"Probably nothing, but it was about...*you* and Javed [bhai](#), and the family," Rubina continued.

"About...the family?" Sofie pretended. Her smile froze as her face drained.

"Yes," said Rubina. "Ridiculous really. I mean, well, you know how children can be? Rashida said she overheard Sikander talking to Hamid about you all... moving? Huh! And something about selling the house? I mean, why would you just suddenly up and leave?" Suppressing feigned mirth she leaned forward, nervously seeking affirmation.

Sofie eyed Rubina with a steely gaze. She was at a crossroads. Press on? Hope she could fend off this inquiry? Or break down and tell all to her dear friend? For a moment at least, she held on, drawing energy from the volcano brewing inside her from the matter having leapt out of the family confines in the way that it obviously had.

Sofie burst into tears.

Expecting to learn bad news when she first came that morning, Rubina had been gradually convinced otherwise throughout the day. Now she, too, experienced the shock that something serious, perhaps more serious than she first suspected, was going on.

"Sofie? Oh no, Sofie, my poor dear. What? What is it? I'm sure we can do something," she soothed, as she sprang to her feet to come across and sit next to her friend. The facts emerged in a patchwork of fragments.

"We have to sell the house!" Sofie bawled. "Have to move," and "It's Javed...swindled by...by—"

Repeatedly, she paused, too overwhelmed to continue. Each time, Rubina gave her a moment to recover, asked a question or two, and they moved on. With the story understood, Rubina was truly sorry for her friend. Her initial sense of possibly assisting surrendered to helplessness. It was not the kind of problem a neighborhood could solve. "Sofie, look if there's anything we can do, please, don't be shy about asking," she offered appropriately vaguely.

"Oh, that's...that's nice of you Rubina, but really, I can't imagine how anyone can help." Sofie sniffled as she thanked her friend for listening to her rambling.

She needed to be left alone. Rubina understood. She gathered her things and quietly saw herself out. Walking home she marveled at how convincing Sofie's mask had been earlier that day.

Sikander was in his room completing his homework while the scene with Rubina played out. Toward him there would be no vulnerable disposition. Incensed at the affair spilling out, in their home no less, and from being told by her best friend, Sofie lost no time in calling Sikander down to release the full measure of her anger.

Sikander had been steeped in his own worries all day, but was utterly shocked that his words had leaked out. He protested that he'd been discreet with Hamid and that he hadn't known that Rashida was listening. Unmoved by his words and stunned by his poor judgment, Sofie was implacable.

In the face of his instincts to suspend his own education on behalf of the family, Sofie's attack was too much for Sikander's young sensibilities. He lashed out.

"What if it's because *you're* too proud and pretentious? What if... What if we're being punished for that? Did you think of that?" Sikander challenged.

Sofie grimaced. "How *dare* you speak to me that way!" she retorted, feeling the sting of a possible grain of truth in her son's response.

"But it *is* something the family deserves. It *has* to be!" Sikander declaimed. Simmering resentment over his father's lack of judgment in dealing with the Kabeers had far from dissipated.

Sikander's counter-attack was ill timed. On the heels of another ineffective round of calling on potential helpers, Javed had just stepped into the house when he heard Sikander's most damning accusations. The yelling came to an abrupt halt as Sofie and Sikander swung their attention to him.

Of all things in Pakistani society, the monarchic status of parents was among the least violable. One did not shout at parents or be short-tempered or angry with them in any way. The [Qur'an](#) had a specific injunction against such behavior, and even the Ten Commandments' "Honor thy father and thy mother," held deep meaning for Muslims.

Enraged by Sikander's declaration that the family deserved its misfortune, but even more so by his son's tone toward Sofie, Javed unleashed his wrath.

"Sikander," he uttered with a menacing softness, "*that*...was no way to speak to your mother. Don't you *ever* speak to her like that again." The tone changed when he exploded with, "You do, and you're no son of mine! *Do you hear me?*" He stalked forward, his nose centimeters from Sikander's, as he scowled. Javed was over the edge. With two of the most trying days of his life, and now this exchange between his hurt and tearful wife and his son, he'd had enough.

It was a raw moment. Sikander could utter no words though he did glare back at his father. Javed understood he was probably berating his son this way for the last time.

Sikander's frustration mounted. He'd been willing, after all, to sacrifice his ambitions for his father's mistake. Why was *he* now to be the focus of

his parents' anger? Unable to hold back, he exploded fiercely.

"It's true! We've been too proud! And now, with a moment of stupidity—" Javed's large hand landed at about the same spot as on the previous occasion but this time with all the vigor his fury could muster. He said nothing. His slap had all the eloquence that was needed.

With what remained of his rational self, Sikander knew he wanted to be alone, away from them all. As if reading his son's mind, Javed shoved him hard on the shoulder as he screamed, "Out of my sight! Go... Go!"

A worried Sofie looked on as Sikander stormed up to his room, gasping with anger. She wanted to chase after him—the situation was beyond any expectation of her earlier rage—but Javed's seething presence filled the room with paralysis.

The evening wore on as Sikander fumed in solitude, his door locked from the inside. Something had to be done. Something had to change. As his mind began to settle on the obvious choice of leaving home, he focused on organizing his departure as he indulged himself with thoughts of being "one less person to bear" for his mother and father.

Packing just a few belongings he paused with his passport in hand. It made him look toward the moonlit scene beyond his bedroom window and think of the world out there. He had little idea what he would do next, but his determination to leave was unshakeable. At least for now. It would have to be without making a scene or facing any protestations that he should stay—*however unlikely that might be*, he reflected, his own sensibilities still not exhausted. It was a rationalization he was comfortable with. He was less comfortable with an inner voice telling him he might be running away from a problem.

Even though it was August, the nights could sometimes get cold. Sikander put on a warm [shalwar](#) and [gamees](#), over which he wore a sleeveless jacket. He also decided to take a light overcoat. Well hidden on his bookshelf behind a cherished volume of Iqbal was all the money he had, a little more than eight thousand rupees rolled up and bound in a rubber band. With the money squeezed into his jacket pocket and his belongings in hand, he stepped gingerly out of his bedroom window, over the railing of his veranda, and onto the top of the outer wall. From there it was a drop of less than three meters to the sandy street below, before Sikander crept silently away.

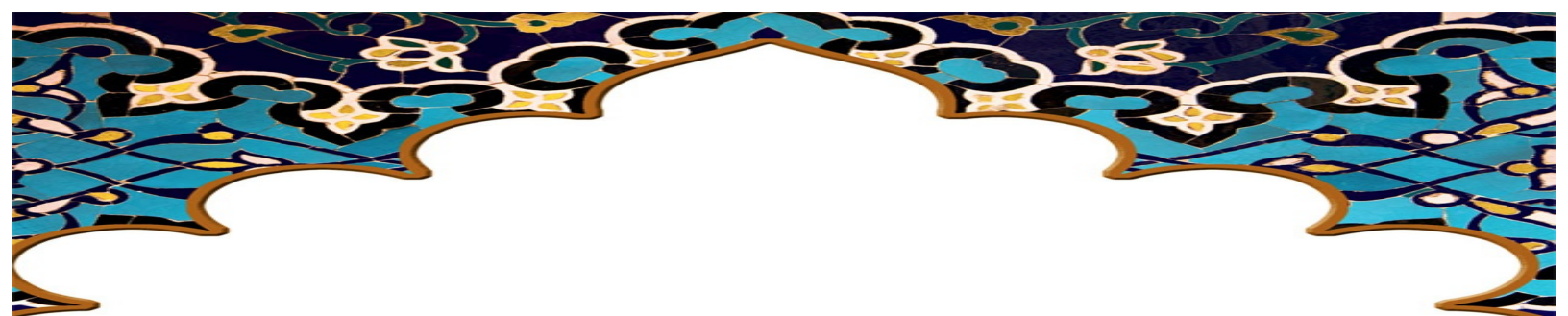
The simple act of leaving challenged Sikander's resolve, but he willed himself to press on, drawing comfort from keeping the option to return home that night before being missed. He hadn't revealed his intentions and the family was, for now, unaware of his departure. He would go to the Zarghooni [Masjid](#), spend the night sleeping on its plush, carpeted floor, and just think things over. Mosques often had people spending a night or two under a coat or blanket. Besides, in the morning there'd be a food offering, so if he *was* going to leave home, at least it wouldn't be on an empty stomach.

After a short walk out of J-Block into Lalazar Avenue and up to the corner of Phase 2 Road, Sikander strolled into the grounds of the Zarghooni. He walked through the entrance courtyard of the now virtually deserted mosque into the main hall. Wishing to avoid attention, he quietly sat on the floor. With [isha](#) already over, Sikander could safely assume he would avoid awkward encounters with people he knew.

After a while, he took out one of the many copies of the [Qur'an](#) on the low bookshelves clustered around the base of each of the mosque's beautifully decorated pillars, and began reciting its verses quietly while following the Urdu translation printed below them. It was as good a time as any, he thought, to be consulting its pages.

Soon, his attention drifted to a far corner of the prayer hall, where he noticed a group of men sitting and chatting with each other. Each wore a turban with a tail of spare cloth hanging over the shoulder. Sikander was too far away to listen to the conversation, which was in any case subdued. Considering the mosque's location, Sikander imagined they were either from one of the sprawling refugee camps around the west side of Peshawar or else they were [Tablighi Jamaat](#).

Whoever they are, they'll probably be gone in an hour or two, Sikander thought, as he lay down to make himself comfortable near one of the pillars. Curled up under his overcoat, he went to sleep for the four hours or so that remained before the dawn [azaan](#).



Chapter 2

Mujahideen

GENTLY AT FIRST BUT THEN more forcefully, Sikander felt himself being nudged. His slowly opening eyes were greeted by a large face with an equally large beard, dyed with the unmistakable rusty orange of [henna](#). As Sikander stirred into consciousness, and the kindly but weather-beaten features came into focus, a broad grin quickly embellished them.

“Wake up! Time for [fajr](#),” urged the man, genially, in his coarse [Pashto](#) and in the good Muslim tradition of not letting a fellow Muslim sleep through a call to the dawn prayer. Fair in complexion, with gray-green eyes, the man wore a white and blue striped turban with its tail of cloth over his right shoulder. A gray sleeveless jacket over a beige [qamees](#) and [shalwar](#) completed his attire.

Having assured himself that Sikander was awake and that his good deed had been done, the man moved to rejoin his companions. Sikander, still yawning from his stupor, trudged over to the washroom to perform his [wudhu](#) ablution and ready himself for prayer. Returning from [wudhu](#), and now wide-awake, it dawned on him that he had been awoken by one of the strangers he’d seen the previous night. The few words the man had spoken betrayed that like Sikander, he was a [Pashtun](#) and more than likely from one of the nearby refugee camps.

Worshippers began lining up in neat rows in readiness for prayer. Sikander noted the strangers standing in the third row from the front and instinctively moved toward them, but quickly took the nearest available position as the [imam](#) launched into prayer. Speaking to the strangers now was out of the question until [fajr](#) was over. While the [imam](#) led the silent congregation, Sikander’s mind wandered. Concern for the possibility that one of the worshippers might recognize him, flashed briefly into his mind. It soon evaporated with the recollection that his friends and family generally performed [fajr](#) at home.

When the [imam](#) concluded, everyone arose from their customary “[tashahud](#),” posture on the floor and started back for their homes. Sikander weaved through the dispersing worshippers to approach the strangers. Although each of the four young men and the older one—evidently their leader—were imposing figures, there was a living warmth on their faces that drew him to seek admission.

Sikander’s family conversed with each other mostly in English or Urdu—or the educated upper- and middle-class blend of the two. But Sofie had also instilled in her children from an early age, both pride and fluency in [Pashto](#). Speaking [Pashto](#) was a virtual requirement for someone to be acknowledged a [Pashtun](#) and would now doubtless ease his acceptance by this group.

Sikander reached out and tapped the older man’s arm, offering his [salaams](#). Attention focused on him as the customary response of “[wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#)” came in chorus from the five-man troop. Without a follow-up the encounter would end there. Sikander quickly added, “I’m Sikander. Sikander [Khan](#),” as he held out his hand and smiled.

Favorably impressed by this Pakistani youth’s accent-free [Pashto](#) greeting, the older figure again revealed his fine set of [miswaaked](#) teeth, as he uttered, “Ah! And my name is Abdul Latif [Khan](#). These are my sons Abdul Rahman and Abdul Majeed, and these are my brother’s sons Ejaz and Saleem.”

After customary handshakes and polite hugging, and with the ice thoroughly broken, Sikander felt it was safe to ask them their purpose.

“I come here about four to six times a year to resupply our effort against the accursed Russians back home,” replied Abdul Latif.

“So you...fight?” probed Sikander, realizing that this might be too direct a question but too late to prevent himself from asking it.

“Hm! [W’Allahi](#), of course we fight,” responded Abdul Latif with an indignant frown. “Are we not [Pashtuns](#) and must we not rid the country of those accursed Russians? What about you? What do you do?”

“Until yesterday I was living here in Hayatabad, but it’s, uh...it’s no longer for me.” offered Sikander with a shrug.

Pressed to do so, Sikander related the previous day’s episode and how it was time to go out on his own. Abdul Latif stood deep in thought, uneasy with Sikander’s issue, especially after seeing disturbingly empathetic nodding from his own young companions. It would be a good example to his sons and nephews if he could knock some sense into the youth and send him home. But there was something about Sikander’s determination that intrigued Abdul Latif. Pressing the young man to contact his family might drive him away, with no saying where he might end up. It was time to explore another possibility.

“Care for some green tea, Sikander? It’ll help us all to think more clearly at this hour.”

Having had no breakfast, Sikander’s mouth was dry, so it was no challenge to agree. The six of them walked out of the grounds of the Zarghooni [Masjid](#), the short distance to Hayatabad’s Civic Center. In its recesses lay the Rahman Coffee Shop, a place as familiar to Sikander as it was to Abdul Latif.

On the way, Sikander discreetly put his hand into his jacket pocket. *Good*. His money was still there. These people certainly seemed religious, but this was Peshawar.

Minutes later, Abdul Latif returned from the counter with two cups of green tea in hand, his sons following him each with their own two cups. Saleem and Ejaz brought up the rear, with a few bakery rolls in a couple of bags. It was a decent, if not rich, breakfast.

About now, Sikander thought, his parents would be stirring. It was Sunday and his father had probably already left the house with scarcely a thought about the previous evening. Sikander was unwilling to forgive him for that. He was sorry he’d upset Sofie but the exchange with his father would have to be resolved in his own mind before he could re-engage with her. *They probably won’t even miss me until after I’m supposed to be back from school*, Sikander mulled.

“What will you do now?” Abdul Latif asked.

“I don’t really know.” Sikander shrugged. “Can’t go home now; my bridges are burned there, and I... I can’t just wander around Peshawar.”

“No,” replied Abdul Latif, solemnly. “You can’t. In fact, the way I see it there are really only two choices. Go back home and deal with things, or... or why not come with us and join a struggle that by the grace of Allah will be worth fighting for? We can help you become a useful fighter in this [jihad](#). We’re [mujahideen](#) and [w’Allahi](#), huh!” Abdul Latif grinned. “We can use *all* the help we can get.”

The words were seismic. Sikander had spent many hours opining with his classmates, and his father for that matter, on the worthiness of the [mujahideen](#) efforts against the Soviets. They had persisted despite seeing their homes demolished, fields reduced to barren wasteland, and children maimed by land mines after mistaking them for toys. Now here they were, real people who had lived this real experience. It was no longer an intellectual exercise.

He recalled the moment of pause from the previous night as he had been packing his things, considering his future. Could *this* be Allah’s way of sending him a message?

“I need to think about this [Khan sahib](#).” Myriad conflicts were racing through Sikander’s mind.

“And we would expect nothing else,” Abdul Latif agreed, beaming.

His sons and nephews grinned encouragingly. As someone closer to their own age, they knew what Sikander was going through and hoped their demeanor would tip him over the edge to make the “right” choice.

“Brother Sikander,” Abdul Majeed interjected, “Aren’t you a Muslim? Aren’t we Muslims? And don’t the infidel communists oppress us in our own country? It’s that simple. What is there to think about? If you’ve decided to leave home, then [w’Allahi](#) let it be for a purpose that will allow you to return to your family as one worthy of his ancestors!”

Compelling reasoning wrapped in simple words, it was an arresting combination. Adding to Sikander’s burgeoning sense of conviction, Saleem joined in.

“Brother, there are few better feelings than seeing the enemy running in fear until their helicopters come to rescue them!”

Abdul Latif chuckled. To a certainty he knew how Sikander’s inner conflict would resolve itself, but it was entertaining to see the realization emerge on the young man’s face. All the while, Abdul Latif fixed his gaze directly on Sikander’s eyes, maintaining an infectiously expectant grin as he nodded at his boys’ prodding, almost *willing* the emergence of the only conclusion possible, from within Sikander’s psyche. And when it came, with an initially reticent but ultimately committed nod of Sikander’s head, Abdul Latif greeted it as one might the birth of a child.

“[W’Allahi! Alhamdulillah!](#)” he proclaimed, and the young men gathered around Sikander to pat him on the back and hug him welcome into their fold.

The decision had been harder to make than to embrace. On its heels tumbled an avalanche of rationalizations as to why it was the obvious choice. It was time he made his own contribution to the cause he had talked so much about. It would give meaning to his leaving home, to himself, his siblings, and his parents. He was on board.

“So? What’s next?” he asked.

“We have to go into Jamrud Bazaar, pick up supplies, and get them back to our temporary house. It’s not far from Jamrud Fort, about seven or eight kilometers north of here. We’ll spend one, maybe two nights there awaiting our [ISI](#) brothers. [InshaAllah](#) they’ll have more information from the Americans about the enemy. If we’re lucky, we’ll also pick up some weapons to take back with us. There’ll be more to tell you once we get to Jamrud but right now we need to hurry; we’ve lost an hour but,” Abdul Latif shrugged, “but it was worth it.

“And Sikander...welcome to our cause, [mujahid](#).”

[Mujahid](#). Sikander began to glow. He offered a slight bow, in acceptance of Abdul Latif’s assignment of such a title. Abdul Latif acknowledged the gesture. “I assume you know that Sikander is our name for Alexander—”

The Great? Yes, I do,” interrupted Sikander, his back straightening. At least in spirit he was a soldier now and he needed all the more to live up to his illustrious name. He motioned forward with outstretched palm and a simple, “Let’s go.”

As they walked along Lalazar Avenue then north toward Takht Baig [Chowk](#), Sikander ventured to learn more about his new companions. “Brother Abdul Latif, why Hayatabad last night?”

“Yesterday evening, we were meeting with a captain of Pakistan’s [ISI](#). Probably has a home somewhere in the Hayatabad area. That’s where he usually asks to meet us; right by the [Jumma Bazaar](#). Calls himself Captain Junaid. We were with him before coming into the [masjid](#) for [isha](#). We thought we might as well spend the night there and [w’Allahi](#), that same night you were sent to us. You’ll be meeting Junaid too, this evening.”

Sikander and Abdul Latif continued chatting as they walked and before long the six of them arrived at Takht Baig [Chowk](#), at which point they turned onto the Grand Trunk Road to head west toward Jamrud.

“Which city do you live in, Brother?” Sikander asked, feeling better informed about Afghanistan than most of his classmates.

Abdul Latif chuckled. “Not a city!” he declared. “It’s a small village to the south of Jalalabad called Laghar Juy. It’s—”

He’ll be going there anyway, so why not let him experience the journey? Abdul Latif mulled. With travel in the country being far from simple, knowing the whereabouts of a place did little to convey what it took to get there. “You’ll see where it is.”

The going was easy and they were soon at the bustling and chaotic Jamrud Bazaar, a place with vendors crammed into a tiny area, each vying for the meager rupees that bargain hunters generally spent there. Plainly visible a little further down the road was the Baab-e-Khyber, a limestone brick gateway arch spanning the GT Road, promising the Khyber Pass ahead to the west, and Afghanistan beyond. Although not now, eventually they would be passing through it.

Strolling around Jamrud Bazaar was pleasant, not just for the buying of goods, but also for the shade it provided from the hot August sun. After visiting a small mosque for [zuhr](#), and following it with a dish of chickpeas and Peshawari [naan](#) taken at a roadside dining place, they walked back to the bazaar.

“Aren’t you going to spend any of that money?” asked Abdul Latif, turning to Sikander.

“Um...” Sikander’s face reddened. He had been careful about it all day. He guessed that Abdul Latif must have searched him while he’d been asleep.

“It’ll do you no good in Afghanistan.” Abdul Latif didn’t care for the name, Afghanistan. He never identified with it politically and saw it as way of separating his Pakistani [Pashtun](#) brethren from those on the other side of the border. But there were times when it was the only reasonable way of referring to the place.

So far, Sikander had not needed to spend any money. He was the charge of his [Pashtun](#) hosts. His needs were theirs to meet. According to their tribal code, [Pashtunwali](#), this extended to personal protection. Protection was a binding obligation on any [Pashtun](#) host, even if a person under his protection were up to that moment a sworn enemy.

“Let me buy our food. At least while we’re in Pakistan,” Sikander offered. Abdul Latif didn’t object. Their shopping for provisions continued until they were able to carry no more. How exactly the group would travel to Afghanistan and how they would manage their accumulating baggage more than once crossed Sikander’s mind as the men left the bazaar.

It was early evening. Tired and hungry, Sikander marveled at the stamina of his hosts. Though he was a fit young man, lugging around his share of the bags of supplies, his backpack, and his coat, had worn him down. Finally, at around seven o’clock, the group approached the intersection of the GT and Warsak Dam Roads. They were supposed to meet their [ISI](#) contact there an hour earlier.

“Abdul Latif!”

The loud voice belonged to a man in his thirties about ten meters away walking hurriedly toward them, making sure he would be heard over the passing traffic. “Where’ve you been? Arif and I have been worried about you!”

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum!](#) No need for alarm, Junaid,” Abdul Latif reassured as Junaid neared them. “We got a little sidetracked into a recruitment operation,” proclaimed Abdul Latif, before relating the story of their encounter with Sikander. Junaid raised an eyebrow as he leaned to the side to look

past his friend and examine the youth.

“Well,” he observed, “healthy, [mashAllah](#). So, [zwey](#), your name’s Sikander eh?”

“Yes. I’m from—”

“Glad you can join us,” Junaid made barely perceptible sideways glances to assure himself that neither he nor the rest of the group was being watched. “Come! We have to go this way.” He gestured toward Warsak Dam Road leading north from the GT Road. “It’s about three kilometers from here,” he continued as he held out his hand to relieve Sikander of some of his burden.

“Where’s Arif?” asked Abdul Latif.

“Gone ahead. He should be waiting for us. God, I hope he has something to eat—I’m famished!” replied Junaid.

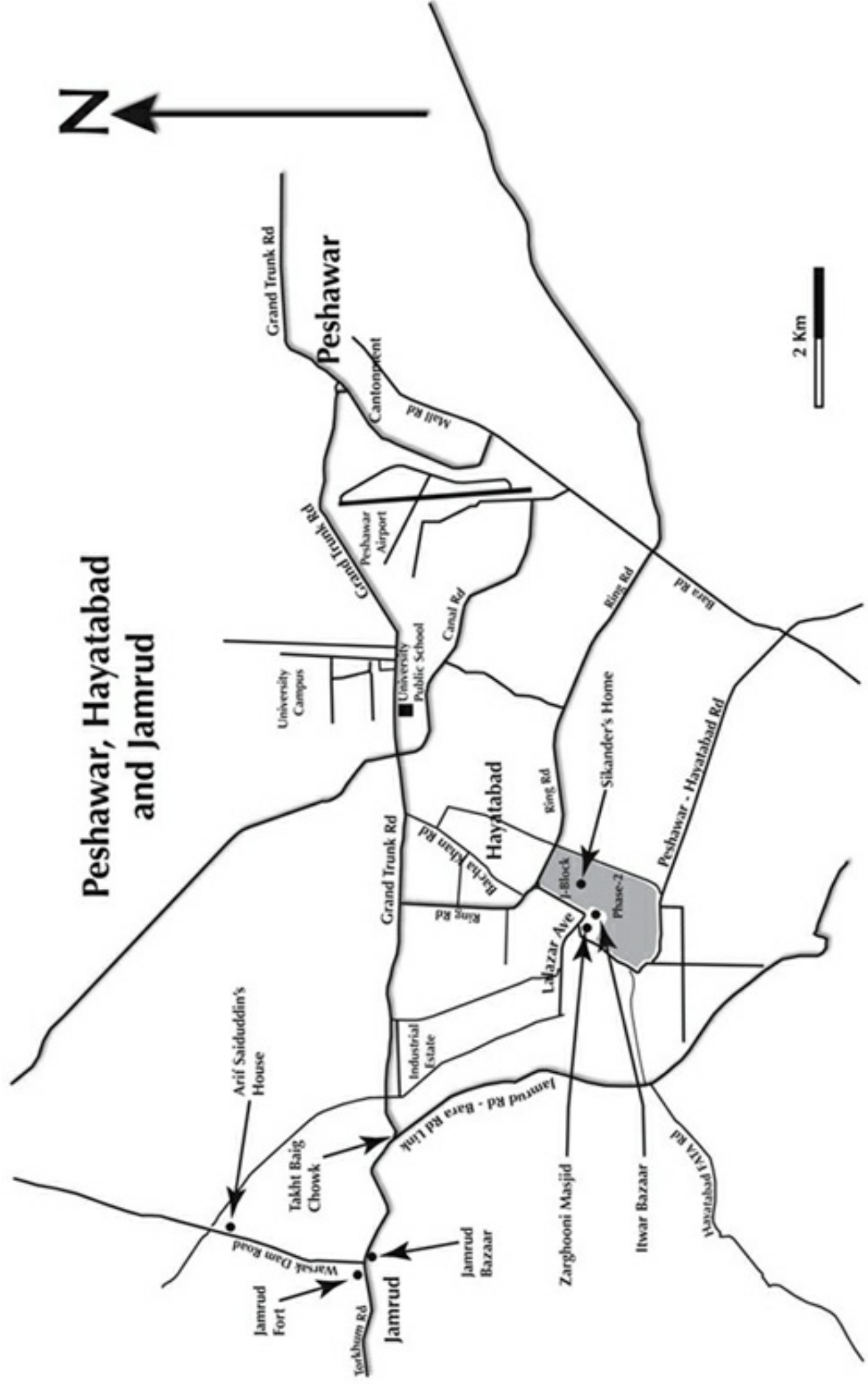
After almost an hour, they came upon a larger-than-average house, and were led by Junaid to the rear entrance. Behind the house stood a mud-covered Mitsubishi Pajero.

Arif Saiduddin [Khan](#) was baby-faced and portly. He was a fifty-three year-old [Pathan](#) landowner from Punjab who also maintained this house north of Jamrud. He was well off but careful about showing it. Having been kidnapped for ransom—an everyday hazard in these parts—eleven years earlier, whenever he visited this particular home, he was not ostentatious.

Abdul Latif knew Arif from not long after the Soviet invasion. It was in early 1980, when the [ISI](#) began engaging with [mujahideen](#) units from around Afghanistan. As they were admitted inside, Arif was occupied with another matter, and all except Junaid, who needed to talk to Arif, were led downstairs to a modest basement room. The group, of which Sikander was increasingly feeling a part, sat around a large table. On it was an equally large map of Afghanistan’s Nangarhar Province, one of the provinces bordering Pakistan’s own North West Frontier Province.

An administrative stalemate between Pakistan’s central government and the tribal rulers was the norm in the region, with neither side interested in disturbing the arrangement. As long as tribesmen could come and go across the border with Afghanistan—or in the south, Iran—they would not bother anyone, except of course for kidnapping for small ransoms any visitors who had foolishly failed to seek their protection.

Around the edges of the map, holding it in place, were a few empty plates, a bowl of fruit, well stocked with apples, apricots, plums, and a few carrots, and a smaller bowl filled with almonds. Sikander’s stomach grumbled in anticipation. He stole a glance at Abdul Latif but blushed as his smiling friend was ahead of him, having seen Sikander’s longing stare at the fruit. It would, however, be impolite to attack the food in the absence of their host, so there it remained. Before long, everyone’s attention was on the map. A surprisingly rare sight in these times, a map was a curiosity that revealed their intimately understood world from a perspective rarely imagined. Abdul Latif, his sons, and nephews knew just about every hill, valley, cave, and stream between Peshawar and Jalalabad, but it *was* intriguing to see perhaps a tenth of their knowledge diagrammed in this fashion.



A few minutes later, a conversation between Junaid and Arif emerged from the stairwell, heralding Arif's heavy descent with Junaid's close behind.

"...safe route, where to drop off the truck, the Hind, and T-62 concentrations, and, yes, when we can expect those damned Stingers!" Arif said, materializing from the dimly lit staircase into the better-lit basement. "Oh, and the money," he muttered looking back over his shoulder.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatullahi wa-barakaatuhu!](#)" proclaimed Arif beaming and directing his attention first to Abdul Latif, then to the rest of them. It wasn't customary to convey this extended form of greeting unless it was a truly special occasion, or, as in this case, the personal habit of the individual offering it.

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#), Brother! Good to see you again," replied Abdul Latif warmly, followed by everyone else.

"Before we begin," Arif noted, "we should make [du'a](#) for the success of your venture."

No one could disagree with the need, given their impending return to the dangerous world of the Afghan resistance. Arguably the one with the longest beard, Abdul Latif instinctively stepped in to lead a brief recitation and supplication for success.

Arif picked up the fruit bowl and offered it to Abdul Latif, Junaid, and then Sikander before setting it down again and asking the remaining men to pick from it as they pleased. He plucked an apricot, took a bite, and gestured the rest of it toward the map.

"All right. You people came into Pakistan through Sara Garhi, but we've just secured a new place for taking mules across," he began. "Here's how you'll be crossing the border. Proceed up the N5 Torkhum Road, about twelve to fifteen kilometers past the Baab-e-Khyber. Not far from the point where the road splits to either side of the river, there'll be a trail leading to the southwest and it'll take you through a compound all the way up this hill. There's a small house there. That's where you'll empty the Pajero and be met by our people; they're [Afridis](#). They'll have five mules for you and will return the...Pajero...back...here..." Arif paused, looked at Abdul Latif and then around the table, landing his gaze finally upon Junaid before declaring with an annoyed and quizzical look, "I was told there'd be five of you."

"Er...yes," said Junaid. "It seems Abdul Latif's picked up a new [mujahid](#). We didn't introduce you but this young man," he gestured to Sikander, "is going to fight [fi-sabeelillah!](#)"

"Really!?" Arif drew the word. "And your name, [zwey](#)?"

"Sikander, sir."

"Aah, Iskander!"

"Er...no, not Iskander, it's Sikander."

"Yes, yes," said Arif dismissively. "But it is all the same, you know?"

"It isn't to me," responded Sikander, not meaning to be as defiant as he sounded.

"What do you mean?" demanded Arif wearing a rapidly brewing frown. "You surely know that they both refer to Alexander the Great?"

Sikander puzzled over his innocuous correction causing so much grief with Arif, who had initially seemed amiable enough. He thought for a moment then pressed his position with a little more force. "Arif [sahib](#), my name is my right. It was given to me by my parents and can't be taken from me against my will to be done with as anyone pleases." Sikander surprised everyone, but most of all himself, with his assertiveness.

Arif's frown deepened into a terrifying scowl as the two stared at each other. *Probably a good time for Abdul Latif to intervene*, thought Sikander as he flicked a nervous glance in his new friend's direction. When he again locked eyes with Arif, however, the scowl vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and on its heels came a belly laugh. The laughter spread quickly among the others, though with considerably less sincerity.

"He! He! Son," said Arif, "you'll be dealing with some rough things out there and, well, I can see you have some steel in you! And well said about your parents naming you. Very good. Very good!"

With everyone's dignity intact, Arif returned to the matter at hand. "As we're using a new staging house this time, we're going to have you do a slightly different zigzag to get to Laghar Juy."

Abdul Latif listened intently as Arif began the detailed explanation. "After spending the night at the house on the hill, you'll be picking up a stash of light arms, including six boxes of ten [RPGs](#) and four [RPG](#) launchers. Together with the supplies you'll be taking from here that should come to about two hundred kilograms for each mule to carry. Take the western route down the ravines until you turn north right here toward Chenar [Kalay](#). There are caves in the hills to the south of the village, which, I'm afraid, is where you'll have to sleep for the night. Sorry.

"After dawn, proceed north and then west...here, then south again right here." His calloused finger pointed to various spots on the map. "From there it's a steep climb up into Showlghar [Kalay](#). That should be around late afternoon, so you can rest there for the night." He gestured to a point on the map well to the south of the main highway connecting Torkhum with Jalalabad and in terrain thick with snaking switchback trails.

"If you leave Showlghar the following morning, you should make it before nightfall to Baro. It's tough going, but it can be done. So far so good?"

"If we go through Baro, it'll make sense to remain in the mountains and go from Baro through Takhto [Kalay](#)," noted Abdul Latif. "At this time of year at that altitude we could have difficulty with rain. But if we can pass Takhto, then we'll have a straight run to the west. I know a little-used gap that will get us into the next valley over here. From there you can see Laghar Juy about eight kilometers away and we can even make that at night if we have to."

"I've seen weather charts from the CIA," said Junaid. "No rain for at least the next four days, so it should be fine."

Impressed with Abdul Latif's command of the landscape, Sikander felt increasingly secure around the man. Whatever lay in front of them, as long as Abdul Latif was with them, they would surely get through it.

"That's about the measure of it," responded Arif. "Once you get to Laghar Juy, the next part is down to the Soviets and where they'd like to be when you hit them!"

"So? What about the Soviets?" asked Abdul Latif, directing his attention to Junaid, who until now was mostly listening with fascination and a tinge of envy for the young men following Abdul Latif into the enemy's backyard.

Although he was a member of the [ISI](#), four years earlier Junaid spent part of his military career with the [SSG](#) mountain unit, one of just six commando units in the Pakistani military at the time. During his training he had been sent to the United States to be with the First Special Operations Detachment Delta—or Delta Force—right after its creation. He had also done a stint with the Strategic Support Branch of U.S. Special Operations Command, which was a combination of CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency units, where he learned much of his intelligence basics. These days, the [ISI](#) had a special Afghan Section headed by Colonel Mohammed Yousaf, and "Junaid" was one of Yousaf's best officers.

"The Americans believe that between five and ten days from now, a Soviet brigade strength force will be heading from Jalalabad toward Torkhum near the border," Junaid began. "We expect them to split up somewhere between Batawul and Hazar Now. If they do, then about two thousand of their

troops supported by T-55s and more than a squadron of Hinds will come rolling south toward all these villages—including Laghar Juy. To prepare for that offensive they'll be assembling their tank units to the east of Batawul. That way, they can keep watch on them from their base in Jalalabad. You and the other forces of the [Hezb-e-Islami Khalis](#) could, [inshaAllah](#), inflict some heavy damage on them if you can carry off an ambush as soon as the tank unit is fully together but before it's out of Batawul. It'll mean keeping a close watch on Batawul, though," he explained.

"We may be able to keep some spies in the villages nearest the road," noted Abdul Latif. "We have some we can station at Anarbagh at least for a short while. There's also some high ground at Mar Koh. That would get us within a kilometer of the road near Batawul and we could try watching from there at night, but we have to be careful to avoid alerting the Russians."

Exchanging a glance with Saleem, Ejaz pointed out that one of his uncles—a brother of Abdul Latif's sister-in-law—lived not far from Mar Koh, so, when the time came, he could be relied upon.

"Very well then," said Arif. "Brother Junaid, I think we're done for the night and it's time for these [mujahideen](#) to retire."

All eight of them stayed together long enough to complete the [isha](#) prayer, after which Junaid promptly stood up to leave.

"Let me see you to the door," Abdul Latif offered, rising to accompany Junaid as they disappeared up the stairs. Shortly afterward, Abdul Latif came down again, yawning and looking like he was ready to drop anywhere.

Meanwhile, Arif led Abdul Rahman and Abdul Majeed out to the back of the house where the Pajero was parked.

"We've had it cleaned up inside," he said, "but we didn't want it to be too attractive on the outside. Don't want the thing stolen before you even get going! The steering's got some slack, so be especially careful when you take that last trail off the N5 highway," he pleaded. Although it was technically the [ISI](#)'s vehicle, it was in his care and he had grown fond of it. In the rough country around Peshawar, its performance was stellar. Arif also revealed a couple of secret gun-stashing compartments in the back in case anyone riding in the vehicle needed "insurance."

With the Pajero inspected, the three of them re-entered the house to join Abdul Latif, Saleem, Ejaz, and Sikander for a good night's sleep before the trip ahead. Sikander was weary. It had been a long day. He felt a wave of remorse for having left everyone at home without a word. He had occasionally gone off with friends after school until relatively late in the evening so the family might not have been alarmed until now, but he knew that the worry would be building rapidly.

The minutes slipped by. Sikander was consumed by thoughts of family, and how his father would now be dealing with the new crisis of his son's disappearance. He resolved to call his mother as soon as he could and let her know something of his plans and maybe even learn from her that a solution might have emerged for the business problem.

But there was no question of him backing out of this mission. Not now, after committing himself. These were tough times in Afghanistan. Everything was down to the [mujahideen](#) resistance and now that he'd been given the opportunity, he was determined to make a difference.



Chapter 3

Khyber Nights

IT WAS TOO FAR TO THE NEAREST mosque, so the dawn prayer was performed in Arif's home when the men awoke the following morning. After returning to sleep for a couple of hours, they awoke a second time around nine o'clock. As everyone gathered for breakfast, Abdul Latif laid out the day's plan. "Arif will help you three load the truck and make sure that it's oiled and fueled," he said, directing his gaze at Saleem, Abdul Majeed, and Abdul Rahman. "Ejaz, you and Sikander will come with me. We need to return to Jamrud to pick up more supplies. We should be back by eleven-thirty or so. After that we'll grab something to eat and get going. Let's try making the drop-off point before sunset."

After a short breakfast, the young men assigned to the vehicle promptly set about their task as Abdul Latif, Sikander, and Ejaz left for Jamrud Bazaar. Wandering among its cramped and bustling stalls, Sikander took advantage of the opportunity to buy a hooded nylon rain jacket and a pair of short hiking boots, which he reasoned would be much more suited to what he might face in the coming days than his present counterfeit Nikes. He particularly liked the boots, but was surprised when he turned one of them over and saw unmistakably Russian characters in the arch just ahead of the heel. Abdul Latif explained that Soviet soldiers sometimes bought their way out of trouble by offering various items to their would-be captors including, on many occasions, weapons. Such items were simply too valuable to consume, and frequently found a profitable outlet in the markets on Pakistan's side of the border.

"So you simply let the enemy soldiers go?" Sikander was puzzled.

"Sikander, you're a [Pashtun](#). You should know we have [melmasthia](#). It's important to us."

"[Melmasthia](#)? Yes, but I never thought it applied to—"

"Look, if someone, even an enemy, comes to my house I'm honor bound to protect them and treat them like a guest. Oh, we might take a ransom, and we certainly don't have to like them, but if they ask for protection, we can't touch them. But we can't afford to keep them for prolonged periods and we have the benefit of selling their gear. So, we take their stuff and let them go."

By late morning, along with Sikander's purchases, the men were hauling small sacks of lentils, chickpeas, and rice, for which Sikander insisted on paying. On the way back to Arif's with his companions, a sense of growing unease preyed on him. He would soon be departing Peshawar and his commitment to leave his family would be irreversible.

"Brother Abdul Latif?" Sikander asked. "I've been away for two nights now. My family hasn't heard from me."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Abdul Latif replied. "What do think you should do?"

"I'm not sure," Sikander replied. He didn't want to appear to have second thoughts about continuing with them to Afghanistan.

"A phone call perhaps? From Arif's? You could find out how your father's progressing, let them know you're safe, and that you've committed yourself to a worthwhile purpose. You wouldn't need to reveal your whereabouts. There's really no way for them to learn that anyway and they'd be wasting their time calling anyone; including the police."

Abdul Latif's simple analysis of the situation captured all the key issues, but something didn't add up in his reference to the police.

"Why wouldn't calling the police make a difference? I mean I understand that they would need to know where to look, and yes, we do joke about their ineptitude, but for serious things like this, surely they'd be worth talking to?" Sikander asked.

"I spoke with Junaid yesterday when seeing him out of Arif's place," replied Abdul Latif. "I mentioned to him that the police might be contacted by someone from Hayatabad claiming that his son had gone missing. Junaid didn't think it would be a problem." Abdul Latif smirked.

"Ah," Sikander nodded.

Despite lugging a sack of rice over his back, Ejaz chuckled at their exchange. Abdul Latif had characteristically thought through all the angles.

Ejaz and his brother, Saleem, were quiet young men. They had lost their father, Abdul Latif's younger brother, Abdus Sami, earlier that same year in the second battle of the Zhawar caves in Paktia Province. He had been with Younus Khalis's [Hezb-e-Islami Khalis](#) forces under the nominal command of Jalaluddin Haqqani. Tragedy struck as they defended the caves. Army units of the Russian puppet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan initially mounted an offensive to recapture the caves. When their [DRA](#) clients failed to make headway, Soviet general Varenikov brought in his own forces and air power in early March. It took them until the middle of April to dislodge the [mujahideen](#), which was when Abdus Sami was killed. It wasn't long before the same [mujahideen](#) retook the caves.

Upon his death, Abdus Sami was celebrated as a great "[shaheed](#)." Naturally, it fell to Abdul Latif, as the surviving older brother, to take his brother's family under his protection.

By the time they returned to Arif's house, the Pajero was packed, leaving only enough cargo room for what they had just bought. Arif stood by the vehicle, eyeing it as if it was his cherished offspring. "Fueled, oiled, and ready to go," he said, tossing the keys to driver designate, Abdul Rahman. Abdul Latif could drive if pressed to do so, but his history with vehicles had been less than stellar. He avoided driving whenever he could.

"May we use your telephone before we leave, brother?" asked Abdul Latif.

"Go ahead." Arif cocked his head toward the house. Abdul Latif beckoned to Sikander to follow him and took him into a living room on the first floor where on a small side table in a corner was a telephone.

"I'll be outside with the others, when you're done." Abdul Latif said.

Sikander paused to rehearse what he would say in response to every point he imagined his mother or father making. Finally, feeling about as ready as he would ever be, he dialed.

A solitary ring was followed by: "Hello?" His mother's clearly exhausted state and croaky voice drove Sikander into a reflexive gulp and the need for another moment to form his thoughts. A second, more plaintive "hello," pursued the first.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum, Ammee-jan](#)," responded Sikander quietly.

"Sikannder! Oh! [Ya Allah! Shukr!](#)" exclaimed Sofie, heaving a sigh. "Sikander, where *are* you? Where have you been? We've been out of our minds worrying!" With the realization that her son was safe, mounting anger crept into her tone. "Why aren't you at home? *Why*? Your father and I, we've been so distraught. He even called the police! Have you no concern for what you've *done* to us, Sikander?" Unable to sustain her anger, she ended in tears. "*See* what you're putting me through!"

"[Ammee](#), I...I'm sorry for raising my voice to you the other evening. I shouldn't have done that. But what [Abba-jee](#) said to me...it made me...well, it made me think about what I have to do. [Ammee](#), I'm going to be gone for a while."

The crying ended.

"Gone? What do you mean...gone?" she stammered, stunned at the absence of a simple apology and a promise of immediate return.

"Yes, [Ammee](#)... It'll be for a while."

Sikander explained how he had found Abdul Latif and how he was going to do what he maybe should have done a year ago.

“But Sikander, have you forgotten the trial your father’s going through right now? Have you no thought for how troubled and pained he’s been? What about school? And the family and everything else?” she asked. “What about Hamid and your other friends? You’re just going to abandon them? Sikander, [betha](#)! Look...maybe I was a little harsh yesterday. And your father, well, you know what he’s going through. I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt you, Sikander. Come home, [betha](#). Please!” The anger melted away leaving only tears.

“[Ammee](#), I really do love... I wanted to let you, Jamil, Sameena and...[Abba-jee](#) know I’m fine and [inshaAllah](#) will make you proud of your son, not...not ashamed. [Ammee](#), I didn’t mean to expose the fam—”

“Sikander, these things happen sometimes. Your father and I, we...we were very...troubled!” she sobbed. “Be sensible Sikander. Come back. Come back now, [betha](#). Please!”

“[Ammee](#), I will. That’s a promise. It just won’t be soon. I need to do this now. I can’t just return and go to school anymore. I know how I wanted to finish so that I could try for—anyway, that’ll all have to wait. College in America’s out of the question now, with the business being in trouble.”

Plainly getting nowhere with her imploring, Sofie regained a little of her poise as she tried to find an angle that might persuade her headstrong son. It struck her that she hadn’t told him about some of the good news during his absence.

“Sikander,” she started, holding the tears back, “your father’s managed to buy a little time. He’s convinced three of his customers to give him advances on the next few months’ worth of business. It’s going to give him enough to take down a quarter of what he’s lost with the Kabeers. He’s also managed to borrow some cash, and [inshaAllah](#), if he can make two of his larger creditors wait for a few months, we should be able to pull through. We may...” Sofie took a deep breath. “We may still be selling the house and moving, but Sikander [betha](#), please come home.”

Her pleading was hard to bear, but a serious burden on Sikander’s mind had been eased. Life within the family home wasn’t about to collapse. He was, however, oblivious to the blow that his leaving school would deliver to his father. Having dropped out of school himself for his own father’s sake, Javed had always been anxious that Sikander not miss out on this important and defining part of his life. Javed always felt inferior when dealing with his in-laws because it was understood that his wife was better educated than he was. He’d be damned if he let that happen to *his* boys.

“[Ammee](#), will you tell [Abba-jee](#) I’m sorry he had to see me behave that way to you? Tell him I’m pleased that he might have found a way through his problem. And tell him...tell him I want to make him proud of me, not wish me out of his sight—” Sikander paused. There was nothing left to say. “I have to go now, [Ammee](#). I’ll call again. Give my love and [salaams](#) to everyone.” Unable to listen to any renewed pleas, Sikander cradled the handset. He stared at it for a moment, sighed and stepped out of the house to rejoin his companions.

The new supplies had already been crammed into the back of the vehicle, and after bidding Arif farewell and his bidding the travelers “[fi-amanillah](#),” the six of them piled into it.

Much later than planned, at three in the afternoon they finally set off, heading south on Warsak Dam Road to the GT Road, turning west through the Baab-e-Khyber, past Jamrud Fort in the direction of Landi Kotal. The initial five kilometers bore the name, Jamrud Road before abruptly changing both character and identity. Heralding the fearsome passage ahead, it became the Torkhum Road, leading the travelers over one of the toughest roads on earth and among its greatest gateways, the twenty-five-kilometer Khyber Pass.

Steep vertical cliffs rose on both sides and at its narrowest point, the pass was barely three meters wide. On this day, the travelers would use only its first dozen kilometers before leaving it for their rendezvous with the [Afridis](#).

The first set of guardian hills to the west of Jamrud formed the easternmost flanks of the Safed Koh, an Urdu term for White Mountains, running from south of Peshawar a hundred kilometers west and defining the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan along their westernmost and tallest seventy-five kilometers. In Afghanistan their name remained the same but changed languages to the [Pashto](#) “[Spin Ghar](#).”

Two kilometers into these hills, as the climbing switchbacks were upon them, the road took on a menacing personality. The conversation died down with everyone’s eyes anxiously locked on the road. Abdul Rahman’s arms and hands scurried around the Pajero’s steering wheel through each hairpin turn. The steering’s slack was worse than Arif had described and to top it off, the afternoon sun, which had yet to drop low enough to be hidden by any but the most nearby mountains in the deepest ravines, shone annoyingly in their faces.

By four-thirty, having slowed to a crawl through the worst of the switchbacks, they entered the section where the road became two ribbons, one going uphill to Torkhum beyond the top of the pass, the other down to Peshawar. Continuing on the uphill side, they soon came upon the expected small open compound to the left of the road and turned into it. It looked abandoned with pieces of rusting equipment and machinery standing out in the open. At its far end, they saw an opening on the other side of which was visible a narrow trail winding back and forth up to the top of a hill where the house that awaited them was situated.

Slowly climbing the trail, the Pajero finally rounded the last bend, as the land flattened out. They were on an open expanse in the middle of which stood the house. Next to it, a large shed was also visible.

Tired but mostly relieved, after parking the Pajero, Abdul Rahman switched off the engine. The travelers spilled out onto the gravel in front of the house, from which four young men and an older one had already emerged to meet the new arrivals.

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#)!” called out Abdul Rahman. The customary replies came, along with customary hugs and handshakes. The young men sprang into action to unload the Pajero.

“I’m Khurram [Afridi](#),” said the older [Pashtun](#), who was clearly in charge.

“Abdul Latif,” came the briefest of self-introductions as Abdul Latif gestured to Khurram to lead them into the house, half turning to his companions he directed a nod for them to follow.

“Your mules aren’t here yet,” Khurram announced, “but they’ll be along later this evening. Don’t worry, they’re not from far away and they’ll be fresh for tomorrow.”

The house was nothing special. It seemed to be only a staging point for expeditions such as theirs and not otherwise inhabited. From a crudely installed holder in a stiff cable coming out of the ceiling hung a single light bulb, its weight inadequate to straighten the cable. Accumulated dust on two ceiling fans betrayed their prolonged idleness and the inadvisability of any attempt to use them now.

Sunset approached and with so many mountains surrounding them, darkness came quickly. Their hosts had been down into the Torkhum Road area before the travelers had arrived and brought back hot lamb [kebabs](#) wrapped in Peshawari [naans](#). It was a welcome meal for them all, and after dinner and the sunset prayer, seated on the floor, the group took to chatting about their different experiences in the wake of the Soviet invasion.

Khurram and his helpers were from the [Afridi](#) tribe, predominant in the Khyber area. Abdul Latif and his followers were [Shinwari](#). Sikander was a

[Yousufzai](#), but with his upbringing in Peshawar was less sensitive to the nuances of [Pashtun](#) tribal rivalries and alliances. One thing he did know was that the [Afridis](#) seemed to have a lock on the opium traffic passing out of Afghanistan through Pakistan to many parts of the world. He had no trouble imagining this house as a drug distribution point and was comforted by the thought that for these people, procuring mules, one of the preferred forms of transport for their opium, would present little difficulty.

When drugs were not preoccupying the [Afridis](#), chances were they were thinking of guns. The [Afridis](#) were known for their mastery of firearm manufacture. It was a cottage industry among them and nowhere more so, than with the Adam [Khel](#) or “Clan of Adam,” named for a long-deceased ancestor. Anything from scrap metal, old cars, tools, and a host of other things from which the metal could be recovered was fair game for being turned into an unlicensed copy of a Lee Enfield or a Browning pistol. [AK-47](#) Kalashnikov automatic rifles, which were rare prior to the Soviets arriving, had made their way into Pakistan over the past few years. Whether abandoned or given in payment for a soldier’s freedom, such weapons readily fell into [Afridi](#) hands and the [Afridis](#) would promptly set to work copying them. The best of their workshops could now turn out a highly functional rendition of an original, which once captured, would be relegated to the demeaning role of template for the mass production of replicas.

Following the [isha](#) prayer, the travelers sprawled out on the floor with blankets or coats to cover them. After all the walking earlier in the day, they had little difficulty embracing slumber.

Just as on their first meeting, Abdul Latif’s grinning face greeted Sikander’s stirring into consciousness. It was time to get up for [fajr](#), have breakfast, and be on their way. Peshawari [naan](#) with [sabaz chai](#) quickly done with, the group stepped outside to be greeted by Khurram, his companions, and five mules. Three of them were grays, one a roan with a bluish gray color, and one a gray-black mix. Such colors were ideal for camouflage among the natural rock colorings of the Safed Koh.

As much as Abdul Latif was comfortable in this terrain, Sikander had never been off the roads in the mountain country west of his home. He had been up toward Landi Kotal before, when his father had combined the need to deliver some switches with a long day’s family outing. But this time, traveling would be on foot, leading these mules. Sikander was pleased to have bought his rain jacket and boots the previous day. He felt prepared and was gamely looking forward to traveling into Afghanistan. But he had to admit, though only to himself, to a certain anxiety about the perils ahead.

With the introduction to the mules completed, Khurram and his people entered the shed, where the materials to be packed were arrayed on the floor. Abdul Latif and his men followed them in. Against one wall, the rocket-propelled grenades were stacked with their launchers. A dozen [AK-47s](#), or perhaps good copies of them, were laid out next to them, together with a box of two-dozen ammunition magazines, each containing thirty rounds. The supplies they had brought from Jamrud were grouped into four piles on the floor. Next to one of the piles were some folded blankets over which had been placed several ropes. Other boxes were stacked three or four high against the remaining walls of the shed.

“We have to separate these into ten roughly equal piles and bind them up with these ropes,” Khurram instructed, sweeping his outstretched hand toward the weapons and supplies. “The supplies can be put on two of the mules and the remaining three will have to take the weapons. We’re also going to give you six of the [AK-47s](#) and the box of ammunition. All these bundles will be wrapped up in blankets and secured to the mules.”

“Keep the rifles and a few ammunition magazines out so we can carry them while we’re walking,” Abdul Latif ordered, before re-entering the house to take another look at the map he’d brought from Arif’s. Abdul Latif mulled over the idea of not following the prescribed route, at least not at the beginning. The clear weather seemed as if it might hold and it would mean saving a day if they took a more westerly route that was only feasible in good weather. Besides, he had no relish for spending the night in a cave.

Oblivious to the nuances of tactical navigation, Sikander simply absorbed the scene. A rare sight for him, the sky was deep blue and cloudless, lacking all trace of the haziness that perpetually hung over the streets of Peshawar and Hayatabad.

With [AK-47s](#) in hand, Abdul Latif and his sons and nephews finally felt as if they were fully clothed. The [Pashtuns’](#) relationship with their weapons was unique. Being without a firearm was like wearing a suit but no socks to a New York business meeting. It wouldn’t be nakedness, but the attire could hardly be described as complete. Not knowing how to use one, Sikander remained without a weapon. As if to compensate, having already strapped on his new Russian boots, he tied the sleeves of his nylon rain jacket around his waist, signaling his own intrepidity as a [mujahid](#).

The packing was completed in short order. The travelers bid [salaams](#) to Khurram and his people and with Abdul Latif out in front carrying only his weapon, he and his troop, each leading one of the five mules, set off for the mountains. For the rest of the day, governed by the land’s contours, they would have to follow a meandering path but one that would lead them in a generally westward direction. With their backs to the Torkhum Road, they climbed over a small ridge behind the house and then along a trail with many switchbacks that would bring them down into a ravine to the northwest. “This will keep us lower and allow easier passage,” explained Abdul Latif.

Sikander’s mule was the roan, hauling the ammunition and two boxes of [RPGs](#), about sixty kilograms in all. A remarkable animal, both curious and intelligent, she was well trained. He liked her distinctive pattern of colors, and named her Neela, the Urdu for “blue,” having already been inspired to name the gray-black mule Kala, or “black.”

Ninety minutes into their journey, with the sun overhead, they reached the bottom of the ravine, where there was a fast flowing stream. They stopped to rest and to sample the water, a cool and refreshing antidote for the heat of the early afternoon. The mules welcomed the brief respite, though there was plenty more stamina in them.

Abdul Latif pointed to his right. “We need to keep this cliff on our right and as we go round it we’ll begin climbing again to that ridge line in front of us,” he told Sikander. “Once we’re on top of the ridge, you’ll be able to see on the other side a descent into a valley which will open onto a small plain.”

Sikander nodded, trying to appear informed. The confident expressions on his young companions’ faces gave him more comfort. Abdul Latif went on to explain that they wouldn’t be sleeping in a cave outside Chenar but would stop for the night in the plain he’d mentioned, where there were several tiny villages whose names were not known to him but where he was sure they’d find shelter.

For a while the trail out of the valley widened and Ejaz called to Sikander to drop back alongside him. Moving side-by-side, the men kept mules on the outside and themselves next to each other between the mules. It was a basic rule offering a degree of protection. If someone were to attack, the animals would provide a modicum of cover, buying them precious seconds to address the threat.

While they hiked, Sikander engaged Ejaz in conversation. He learned of the Afghan resistance, experienced through Ejaz’s eyes and ears. Ejaz told him of the sad tragedy of the loss of their father and how he was now the nominal head of the family though, of course, he always deferred to his more experienced uncle who had, after all, lost a brother. Ejaz was still pained by the loss but was proud to describe the events leading to his father’s death. The survivors of Zhawar that had also been part of the same [Hezb-e-Islami Khalis mujahideen](#) had related them to him.

Ejaz always spoke thoughtfully and there was something of a lyrical slant to his [Pashto](#) delivery. He described the abundant fields of his home

village fed by the stream flowing out of the nearby mountains. He explained how many of the same fields had been bombed and were now barely arable. He also described the stunning beauty of the [Spin Ghar](#) and how the mountains formed a wall that often sheltered the Laghar Juy region from the more aggressive winds out of the south, making it, when not ravaged by war, a pleasant place to live.

Sikander asked him how the family had coped with the passing of his father. He told of how his mother always beamed with pride when talking about her late husband, but in truth her grief lingered more intensely than she let on. Alone, she often succumbed to bouts of silent weeping, typically into the night after [ishā](#). Although she plainly hadn't intended for her children to feel her pain, she was not very successful at hiding it.

Ejaz also spoke of his sister, Rabia, who at sixteen was four years his junior, and how she always looked up to him especially after the passing of their father. She was intelligent and well read, though only in [Pashto](#). Some of the men in Laghar Juy had frowned on the notion of girls doing anything but producing children and keeping house, but neither Abdus Sami nor Abdul Latif shared this view. Rather than a modern concern for gender equality, from their perspective, literate girls and women were a social necessity and actually something their Islamic ideals demanded of them. Periodically, it caused tensions in the community, but rarely spawned any crisis.

The trail narrowed, forcing Sikander to fall back behind Ejaz. He could see that they were headed toward a saddle feature on top of the ridge ahead of them. To the left of it was the rest of the ridge, stretching southeast for over a kilometer. To the right was an incline consisting mostly of crumbled scree and then a rock face that rose almost two hundred and fifty meters. The winding trail led to the lowest point of the saddle, the best place to pass over the ridge.

As they approached it, they continued gaining elevation. Looking back toward their point of departure, from where Sikander stood, he could make out in the distance the hazy air over Peshawar and the meandering gray ribbon of the Torkhum Road coming out of Jamrud. The previous night's staging house was not visible, being hidden by the jutting mountain wall around which they had been climbing. To his left, however, the view was breathtaking. Somewhere in the haze was his hometown, awaking in Sikander, memories of his mother's impassioned pleas the previous day. He earnestly hoped that Javed would get over any remorse he might be feeling, and focus instead on solving the business crisis. Thoughts spilled into emotion. Sikander struggled to contain the wetness in his eyes, frequently wiping them with his free hand. He was thankful for the noise of feet and hooves up ahead, rendering his emotional lapse mercifully inaudible.

The travelers coalesced at the top of the saddle. As promised, the location provided an excellent though worrisome perspective of the downward slopes into the plain in front of them. Sikander had little idea of how that descent would even be possible, but his trust in his companions was complete. Under [melmasthia](#), he was in their care.

Abdul Latif allowed them only a brief rest before they were on their feet beginning the descent into the plain. The ridge, now behind them, permitted one final glance back toward Peshawar before eventually blocking off any further view of the city. When the moment came, Sikander was consumed by feelings of severance and anticipation. As much as he wondered when he might again lay eyes on his home and family, his eagerness to learn what lay ahead remained. They stopped twice to rest before completing the descent by four in the afternoon. The going became a lot easier once they were on the plain. A narrow river ran through it, which they followed for about a kilometer until they came upon a small village.

The villagers were Aka [Khel Afridis](#)—feud-rivals of the much larger Adam [Khel](#)—and were not readily hospitable to people emerging from Adam [Khel](#) territory. But Abdul Latif knew one of their senior regional chieftains, [Khan](#) Jehangir Sultan, reasonably well and if he could invoke his protection he was sure that these people would not hold his emerging from rival territory against him. Besides, being a [Shinwari](#) he had no particular feud with the Aka [Khel](#). To everyone's relief, Jehangir was well known in the village and once the connection was established, the villagers shifted from their hesitant posture to a more welcoming one, though they still showed a disturbing interest in the cargo of weapons.

Only by reminding the villagers of their shared hatred of the Soviets, invoking Jehangir's name, making a thousand-rupee "gift" from Sikander's still intact stash, and speaking with a forceful voice conveying the confidence of someone unafraid of his situation did Abdul Latif manage to achieve security for the group.

By the time he was done, they were so welcome that one of the members of the village [jirga](#) took the step of offering them an empty home in which to stay the night. He also invited them to dine with him and his family, which effectively sealed their protection. Abdul Latif had handled the situation as well as any career diplomat and had only to give up a thousand rupees of Sikander's money in return.

I suppose they owe me now. At least I have something over them, Sikander mused with pride.

The group was taken to the home offered, unpacked, and after combining—as permitted for travellers—the midday [zuhr](#) with the mid-afternoon [asr](#), they took a well-earned rest.

After [maghrib](#), Sikander decided to step out for a stroll. The land cooled down quickly after sunset up here, and though it would be getting much colder later, at this time it was pleasant. As the evening drew on and the sky darkened, he was struck by the dazzling brilliance of the night's stars. He was at least seven hundred meters higher up than in Peshawar and there was not a hint of dust in the air. It was as if Sikander was discovering the true nature of fresh air for the first time, having breathed in the exhaust fumes of Peshawar's incessant traffic for a good part of his life. But it was the clarity of the night sky and for him, the unprecedented number of stars it permitted his seeing that made the greatest impact.

Just before eight o'clock, the travelers proceeded to the home of the village elder, a man of fifty-five years called Yaqub, who introduced the men to his three sons, one of whom, Aurangzeb, was about the same age as Abdul Majeed and Sikander. The two much younger ones, Nadeem and Sohail, bore resemblances to each other but not at all to Aurangzeb. As Sikander thought about this, he became aware of the soft chatter of the women of the household. They were preparing the meal. From where he was seated he could see into the back-room-cum-kitchen and although he tried not to draw attention to himself by staring too frequently or obviously in their direction, his seventeen male years hindered his efforts. Through a succession of glances, Sikander identified a young girl of about eighteen, an older woman of perhaps thirty-two, and another older woman closer to Yaqub's age. The back room was dimly lit with oil lanterns and further details were hard to make out.

"Hinna, bring in the food!" said Yaqub. "Our guests are hungry and tired."

It was the young girl who carried out a large plate with lamb [kebabs](#) and another with steaming hot rice. She was not veiled in a head-to-toe [burkha](#) but had a shawl over her brown hair and a long red and blue tunic dress that was colorfully decorated. Sikander could see her natural beauty and clear complexion, but impossible to ignore, her eyes were her most striking feature.

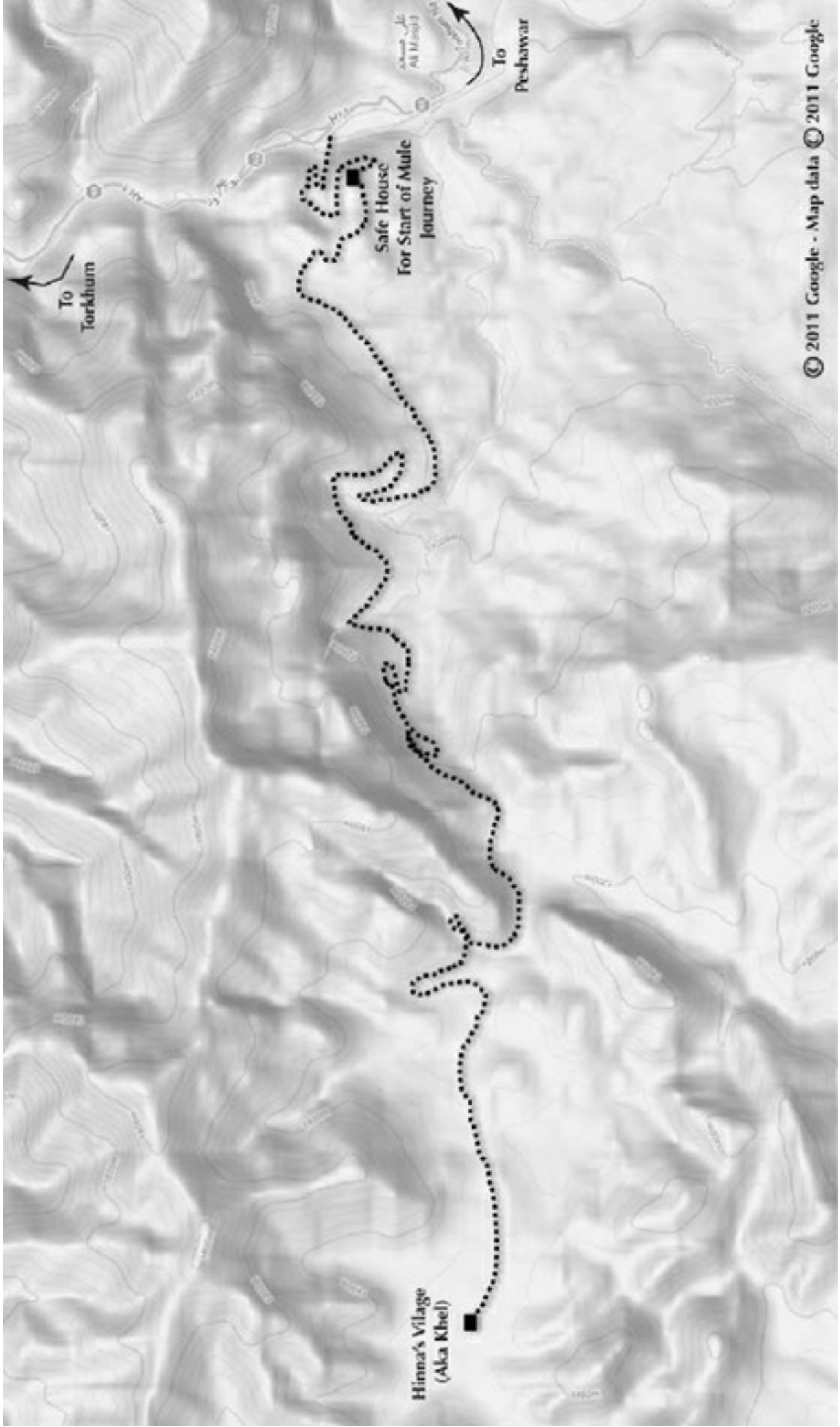
A dance of stolen glances ensued. While Sikander discreetly examined her, the girl's own blue-green eyes darted around the room, dwelling briefly on Ejaz and then Abdul Rahman, each of whom quickly looked away, embarrassed that she had caught them almost staring at her. As she set the plates down on the floor where everyone was seated cross-legged on a large blue and orange wool Bokhara rug, her eyes met Sikander's and then Saleem's, returning finally to Ejaz. She smiled nervously, and though it was hard for Sikander to draw away his gaze, his sensibilities kept him from ogling.

Yaqub observed the young men, unable to repress a smile. As Hinna was leaving the room, he felt compelled to reveal that she had woven the rug

on which they were sitting. Abdul Latif complemented Yaqub on having such a fine and skilled daughter, causing the retreating Hinna to blush visibly. It would have been quite improper for any of the young men to offer the same comment, but the chances of that were negligible. None of them had paid attention to Yaqub's words.

On Hinna's heels came the woman in her early thirties, with a large dish of lentils and a plate piled high with goat-buttered [naan](#) bread. She was likewise dressed in a tunic with a little less decoration, and wore a shawl drawn over her head but one with a large overhang almost hiding her face.

Sikander managed to glimpse a smile from her and responded in kind. As she too, withdrew into the rear of the house, it dawned on Sikander that Yaqub was probably married to both this woman and the older one. Yaqub's oldest son and Hinna had to be the older woman's children.



As the conversation meandered over dinner, Sikander learned that he had guessed correctly and that the younger woman's name was Yasmeen. The older one was Shahnaz. The night drew on and the hosts and guests chatted about things in Pakistan and the war and life in general. Each time a new course of food was served, Hinna brought it in and collected the empty dishes. Yaqub made several more references to his daughter's skills and other fine qualities without sounding too much like a salesman but making it increasingly apparent to Abdul Latif that Yaqub was hoping for a proposal. In these parts, no clock ticked faster than for a daughter that had come of age and getting her married as soon as possible was a parental duty. The evening's invitation had not lacked such a motive.

As far as Sikander was able to see, Yaqub's aspirations for Hinna might have been making headway with Ejaz. It wasn't long before the travelers' weariness was all too apparent and the guests finally asked their host's permission to leave. Aurangzeb led them back to the rest house to spend the night.

Among the dreams Sikander experienced that night, the most memorable was vivid and pleasant. He was alone, in front of a large shiny granite wall. Deep black in color, it seemed to challenge him to climb it. All around him was barren sand, a blue sky, and this impossible wall. Looking up he saw that it rose to a great height, perhaps a hundred meters. Instinctively, he reached out to caress the smooth granite with the palm of a hand, a little higher up the wall than his head and was surprised to feel it grip the surface, almost as a lizard's foot might do. His knees and toes were similarly endowed and readily supported his weight. With impossible ease he scaled the wall, and when he reached the top he found he was standing on the top surface of an immense granite cube where he could comfortably walk upright.

Almost immediately, the hitherto shiny black surface transformed into a beautiful green pasture, and a short distance in front of him was a fast-flowing stream. The smell of clean air was palpable. He found himself dwelling on each breath to savor its sweetness. A small boat moored to the stump of what was once a large bush floated on the stream. As he neared the boat, he became aware of a stunningly beautiful girl standing on the stream's opposite bank. About his age, possibly younger, she was dressed in black from head to toe, but her [dupattha](#) and [gamees](#) were trimmed with a silver embroidered design. The dark outfit contrasted with her creamy face, and as his eyes connected with hers, she held his gaze expectantly and leaned very slightly forward in a demure bow.

While bowing, she made a gently beckoning gesture with her arm, then straightened and smiled, hopeful for Sikander's next move.

Without a thought he stepped into the boat, loosened the mooring, and shoved off toward her. But the boat soon began taking on water.

Immediately Sikander's attention was drawn to preventing it from sinking, but as he lost his balance the boat capsized, depositing him into the water. Strangely, he didn't feel the need to struggle even as he sensed his lungs filling. Through the surface of the water, mesmerized by her appearance, Sikander saw the girl looking down upon his submerged face and heard her soft voice calling: "Sikander... Sikander... Sikander—"

Sikander's eyes stirred, then opened. *Ejaz?*

Ejaz was calling out to him in a loud whisper while nudging him awake.

"Uuh? What? What is it?" Sikander asked, disappointed with the realization he'd only been dreaming, though pleased with the experience.

"You awake?" whispered Ejaz.

"I am now, but...what time is it?" Sikander rubbed his eyes.

"Three o'clock."

"Three? In the morning!?" Sikander whispered wearily, preserving the relative silence between them.

"I can't sleep," Ejaz clarified. "I can't stop thinking about Yaqub's daughter. Did you see her eyes and her golden hair? Huh! [W'Allahi](#), she's put a spell on me. I...I'm lost to her!" Idiotically, Ejaz shook his head as he emitted a heavy sigh.

"Mhmm... I know what you mean, Ejaz," acknowledged Sikander, still in a loud whisper, and now more awake. "Want to go outside and talk?" Against the faint light coming through a window, Ejaz's silhouetted head nodded as he quietly arose, picked up his blanket, and wrapped it around his shoulders. The two crept out into the open to talk more easily.

Sikander felt out of place. He was at least three years the junior of the two and hardly in a position to dispense advice. It was no doubt a measure of Ejaz's less than competent state of mind, thought Sikander, that he imagined his new, young friend might help him think through his predicament. Still, Sikander was mildly annoyed that this was the only reason he'd been transported from such a delightful scene as his erstwhile dream into Ejaz's reality.

"So?"

"So, I suppose I could tell my uncle that as she's an available girl and I *am* after all, unmarried...maybe he could intercede for me with Yaqub?" said Ejaz as he developed his idea.

"*Sounds* straightforward enough. What's your problem?" Sikander's puzzlement compounded his irritation.

"What if she doesn't want to marry me?"

Sikander was surprised but impressed by the question. "Ejaz, surely if her father consents, why do—?"

"It's his consent without hers that I worry about," Ejaz interrupted. "She's obviously lived under her mother's wing until now and what could he possibly know of *her* wishes, to be handing her over to a stranger like me?"

"Well, we're in no position to solve that problem right now, are we, Ejaz? I mean, we're what—eight?—maybe ten kilometers behind where we should be right now, and this...distraction...is hardly something we can afford." Sikander shook his head. "I can't imagine your uncle getting sidetracked by it when we have to press on to Laghar Juy."

"I can..." The voice from behind startled both of them. "Hm! But not for long."

"*Uncle!*" uttered Ejaz, in surprised embarrassment.

Abdul Latif suspended a shrug. "I heard voices and thought someone might be stealing the cargo or the mules," he explained in a low voice.

"What uh, what exactly do you think you can do?" Ejaz asked,

Smiling smugly Abdul Latif turned to the matter at hand. "Ejaz, I *was* there last night, you know, and I understand the mind of someone like Yaqub a lot better than you do." Abdul Latif remained cryptic to entertain himself just a little longer with Ejaz's uncertainty over the extent of any eavesdropping. "Oh, come now, Ejaz," he continued. "Let's get to the point. You want to ask for Hinna and Yaqub wants you to ask for her. After that, will you like her? Will she like you? [Allahu a'alam!](#)" he shrugged.

Ejaz was transfixed.

"Ejaz, who likes whom is one of life's unfathomable mysteries, but know that you won't remain who you are and she won't remain who she is, at

least not for long. You'll affect who she'll become and she you. So the way I see it, what matters isn't so much what's true now, but what you both do in life together to make true for the future."

"So, what do you have in mind, Uncle?"

Abdul Latif was way ahead of Ejaz.

"Well, it *would* be proper for me to approach Yaqub. He seemed interested last night anyway so he shouldn't be surprised. But I'm also going to suggest that he seek his daughter's permission to accept his recommendation. I'll say it's our family custom and we think it's bad luck not to consult the bride-to-be." He chuckled triumphantly.

"Uncle...I—" began Ejaz, who could then say little else. His uncle's characteristic beneficence, understanding, and intellect had again proven indispensable.

"It's almost time for [fajr](#). We have a long day in front of us," said Abdul Latif in closing. "Now that you've ruined a night's sleep, do you mind if we get back to bed for the hour or so we have left?"

The three of them returned to the house and slid back under their blankets. As he lay there, Sikander recalled the passage he'd last read in Shakespeare and mused that here was Ejaz, who had taken the tide at its flood all right, but who also seemed to understand exquisitely the bard's reference to "losing our ventures."

Morning broke and the usual duties were performed. Yaqub wasn't about to risk his [melmasthia](#) reputation by allowing his guests to come looking for breakfast. He ordered up food and instructed Nadeem and Sohail to take it to their quarters, while Aurangzeb was directed to tend to the mules that had to be fed and watered before resuming the journey.

After breakfast, Abdul Latif returned to Yaqub's house with Ejaz to broach the subject of Hinna.

"Brother Yaqub," he began, "you've been a most gracious host and indeed attended to our every need while we've been here. Reluctantly, we must now depart, but before we do, I confess that having seen how richly endowed you are with your...talented...daughter, we would be most honored if you would give your permission and seek hers to be...well, to be engaged to my nephew." He gestured to Ejaz.

Barely concealing his delight, Yaqub briefly studied Ejaz before returning his attention to Abdul Latif. "I see," he declared. "And what have you in mind exactly?" It was Yaqub's cryptic reference to [mehr](#).

"That will need to be determined no doubt more precisely," offered Abdul Latif, "but Brother Yaqub, you might consider that Ejaz is an upstanding man and the surviving son of Abdus Sami, my brother, the [shaheed](#) who fought and died for the [mujahideen](#) at the caves of Zhawar. Will she not be honored enough by becoming his wife?"

"Of course, of course!" uttered Yaqub, having heard this for the first time and now really warming to the idea. He called out to his senior wife, "Shahnaz!" and gestured to Aurangzeb to retrieve his mother. It was also her right to give her daughter away in marriage. With her [dupattha](#) drawn forward, Shahnaz stepped silently into the room. She offered a dignified [salaam](#) greeting and was respectfully acknowledged. Yaqub described the proposal from Abdul Latif as she absorbed it all through her veil without words or movement. Hers was also a concern about the [mehr](#) and she, too, had her own tangential way of addressing it.

"Brother," she began, "Hinna is as close to me as my own liver and I have sheltered, clothed, and fed this daughter of mine for almost twenty years. I cannot allow her to be harmed in any way. We know of the honorable ways of the [Shinwari](#) and we respect your brother's brave [shahadah](#). But how can I be confident that my daughter will not be abused?"

"On my word of honor, your daughter shall be our daughter. Is it not said that a daughter is but a guest in her parents' home and that her true destiny lies with the family into which she marries? I commit that if my nephew so much as harms a hair of her head, he will answer to me for it. And he will be happy to pay the [mehr](#), which will not be less than—fifty?—thousand rupees?—upon demand to her. If he fails to live up to this condition then [w'Allahi](#), he will be brought to your doorstep to answer for it."

Yaqub and Shahnaz were sold. By deciding they would ask their daughter for her permission, however, a face-saving option was thus created in case they changed their minds. They could put it down to Hinna's lack of interest and no one would be slighted or accuse the other party of reneging on an understanding.

In the quiet of the back room, with her father present, Hinna was asked by Shahnaz and only after the briefest of pauses did she nod in agreement. As she did, she drew her [dupattha](#) further over her face in shyness at the proposal and directed her gaze downward as befitted a girl in her situation. Yaqub meanwhile, emerged triumphant with the news.

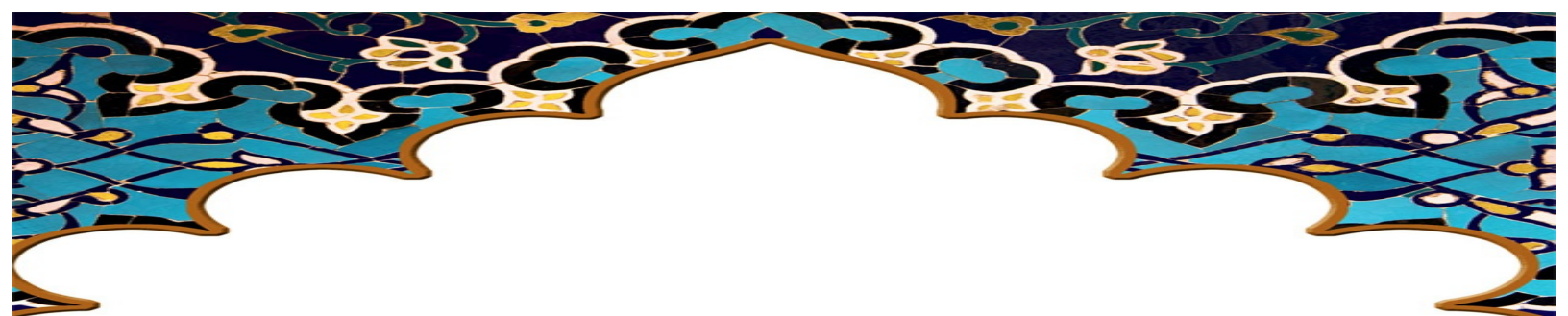
"[W'Allahi](#), then it's settled!" exclaimed Abdul Latif, jubilantly exchanging glances with Ejaz. "And my warmest [mubarak](#) to you and your family! We will, of course, need to go on today, but we'll be back [inshaAllah](#) and with a full [baraat](#) when you're ready for us. We'll also send a ring as soon as we've given the good news to Ejaz's mother and obtained her consent."

This was satisfactory to Yaqub, who was delighted at having landed a match for his daughter and with such honorable people, as far as he could judge.

Beaming, Abdul Latif emerged from the house with Ejaz, and as soon as they were outside enveloped him in a loving embrace as he broke the news to the rest of his party. Once free from the bear hug, Ejaz himself was overcome with bliss while the others looked on in amusement and heartfelt happiness. Although genuinely pleased for him, Sikander couldn't help reflecting upon how such a scene might ever play out on his own behalf. He wondered what his wife-to-be was doing at that moment and what kind of a life she might have led up to now. But it would not be so bad, he thought, if she resembled the mystery girl of his dream.

Abruptly, his conscious reflection came to a halt. Sikander couldn't recall the dream girl's face. He had been so consumed by absorbing her overall beauty that nothing of his mind had remained available to retain her particular features. Still, even if he couldn't remember what she looked like, he could at least remember the delight that night had given him.

Indeed, that starry night—with its small village of the Aka [Khel](#), the mountains of the Khyber, and the girl of his dream—was one he'd surely remember until his dying breath.



Chapter 4

Laghar Juy

AFTER A BRIEF BUT COLORFUL celebration of the engagement, Abdul Latif directed his companions to gather their belongings, check the fastenings on their mules and cargo and prepare to leave. When they were ready, he and his men returned to Yaqub and his family. The women were already out in front of the house, unable to conceal their happiness. Ejaz and Hinna were allowed to exchange a few words with each other now that their status had been transformed, nominally at least, until Ejaz's mother approved of the match.

Yaqub offered two villagers to escort the travelers until they were out of the vale. In light of the newly established bond, it was not an offer to refuse. Soon, with the sun still low in the sky behind them and the escorts riding out in front, Abdul Latif and his men bid [salaams](#) to Yaqub and his family and waving to their overnight hosts, proceeded northwest out of the village.

Mountains surrounded them but in the northwest corner of the plain lay a passage that, after a short climb, would allow them to reach a second, much larger plain. They were soon at the passage, and followed it around to the west and then southwest as it deposited them into the eastern end of the next plain. This was as far as the escorts could take them, and after farewell [salaams](#), they headed back to their village.

In the new plain, to the travelers' left was a mountain chain running first to the southwest then due west, creating a southern wall that curved gently northward. To their right a much taller set of mountains including some that were snow-capped, continued first northwest and then west, forming a northern wall curving southward. In the northern mountains rivers or streams spilling their waters onto the lowland had carved several gaps. Both mountain chains met at the far western end of this leaf-shaped plain some eight kilometers ahead of the travelers. In the middle of this flat expanse, about three kilometers from the travelers' location, lay an isolated hill resembling an island.

Tracking southwest, Ejaz and Abdul Latif strode out at the head of the group. Ejaz was thoroughly energized by his enchantment with Hinna and the prospect of being her husband. His steps were light and he couldn't help drawing poetic comparisons of the scene with his fiancée's captivating beauty—comparisons made all the more easy as the vista in every direction was indeed enchanting. Along the travelers' initial southwesterly track, the mountains to their left, shaded from the low morning sun, formed a gray-green wall casting long shadows onto the plain. For as long as possible, Abdul Latif kept his troop close to the southern wall walking in the mountain shadows, making themselves both less visible and cooler.

Their way out of this plain was to be through the northern mountains. The planned route required them to take one of its gaps about halfway along the length of the chain. That gap would lead them toward Chenar across the border. However, given the excellent weather, Abdul Latif decided to bypass Chenar and commit to a direct path to Showlghar. Although a higher climb would be involved, it would shorten their journey by no less than ten kilometers. This would require them to take another gap farther west along the northern chain than the one for Chenar. After about an hour of hugging the southern wall, Abdul Latif led his men diagonally northwest across the plain toward the Showlghar passage.

Behind Abdul Latif and Ejaz were Saleem and Abdul Rahman, walking in the usual formation of mules on the outside and travelers on the inside. Abdul Majeed and Sikander brought up the rear.

Abdul Majeed was less than twenty years old, Sikander guessed. Exact ages were not especially important to village-dwelling Afghans, so even Abdul Majeed himself had only a rough idea. Although quiet, he seemed to Sikander a more intense individual than either of his cousins or his older brother. His dark beard was almost as long as Abdul Latif's, and his eyes were brown and narrow. He was a striking young man and most people would consider him handsome.

Over his gray [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#) Abdul Majeed wore a black sleeveless jacket always left unbuttoned. On his head was a black turban. A tall hundred and eighty centimeters, he carried himself in a dignified manner without seeming arrogant.

"What about you, Abdul Majeed? When do you think you'll be married?" Sikander inquired half-jokingly. On the heels of Ejaz's provisional engagement, the subject of marriage had been foremost on the travelers' lips.

"[Allahu a'alam](#)," declared Abdul Majeed with his brightly [miswaaked](#) grin and a shrug inherited from his father.

"All right," said Sikander, "but is there someone in your mind or heart?"

"Maybe." Abdul Majeed replied.

Sensing possible unease in this line of conversation, Sikander changed the subject. He looked around at the scene before declaring, "[SubhanAllah!](#) I never thought a place could be so breathtaking."

Abdul Majeed nodded and this time, being more open, he volunteered that he had been through these parts more than once with his father, who had known the area well. "They have hardy mule breeds here and they can be as large as horses, only much stronger. I always enjoy coming up the mountains into the Aka [Khel's](#) area, but last night was my first in that particular village. We normally travel to and from the Torkhum Road on a more southerly path via Sara Garhi."

"Isn't it dangerous? Ever been injured?"

"There *are* rock slides in the spring and summer. Huh! Sometimes those ravines can get so bad, we can't recognize the landscape." He gestured ahead and to his right. "In winter, ice cracks the rock. When it thaws, the rocks loosen and fall, especially after it rains. But it's almost September, so it shouldn't be so bad right now. The rains have pretty much died down. As for injuries..." Abdul Majeed glanced downward, directing Sikander's gaze to follow. He raised his left [shalwar](#) leg to reveal a twenty-centimeter scar running up the length of his shin. Sikander winced. Abdul Majeed grinned.

Eventually, the group arrived at the ravine through which they would reach Showlghar and climbed into it. Thankfully, after the heat of the plain, the shade from the afternoon sun provided by the steep valley walls was welcome. But with it came a sense of foreboding. The slopes were devoid of vegetation and the boulders, rocks, and rubble all around had sharp, unforgiving features. Through the middle of this harsh scene, a rapidly flowing mountain stream drained out of the ravine onto the plain that they were leaving.

Abdul Latif deftly led the way over the rocks, knowing instinctively where the footing would be sure and where it would be questionable. *No country for wheels*, he mused. For feet and hoofs it was ideal.

The day wore on, and the group made slow but steady progress climbing and winding up through the pass. Once it had been crested, the going was much easier on their descent into Showlghar [Kalay](#).

Afghanistan had embraced them. It was five in the afternoon, and they were now in the [Spin Ghar](#) Mountains of Nangarhar Province. It was also nominally enemy territory, so a direct run to Laghar Juy was out of the question. Instead, their onward route would have to remain on the mountain slopes. Their path was to take them west while making a large arc around the northern edge of the mountains, for a brief stop at Baro [Kalay](#) before moving on to Takhto [Kalay](#). That was all still ahead of them. For now, it was time to greet some fellow [Shinwaris](#), spend the evening with them, and relax.

Showlghar was a small village but many of the people had heard of the brothers Abdul Latif and Abdus Sami and were pleased to see the seasoned warrior with his young troop. They were more pleased to see fresh weapons being brought in to help with the fighting. The head of the village was a substantial man of forty-five by the name of Akhtar Ali [Khan](#). He received the visitors warmly.

“They’ve been flying helicopters over this area most of the day. Must be looking for you people. Perhaps you were seen or given away by those [Afridis](#). Huh! It’s money, guns, and opium with them. That’s all.” Akhtar Ali didn’t care for the [Afridis](#) and wasn’t shy about revealing it.

Being now engaged to an [Afridi](#), Ejaz’s discomfort with Akhtar Ali’s words registered with Abdul Latif through a mutual exchange of glances. He took the cue to change the subject.

“Perhaps it was just a routine patrol,” Abdul Latif began. “This is, after all, a fairly loosely managed border, and there’s plenty of back-and-forth traffic. It’s hard to believe it was just for us.”

Abdul Latif couldn’t imagine that Yaqub or Khurram [Afridi](#) had sold them out, but one or more of Yaqub’s fellow villagers couldn’t be ruled out. He reflected on the good luck inherent in deciding not to come by way of Chenar. He had mentioned Chenar as a destination only when outside Yaqub’s house. If there had been any informants or, more likely, opportunists looking for some ready cash, they would have directed the Soviets there. But the thought of being so soon the focus of a search-and-destroy mission was disconcerting.

The day’s trek had been tiring and the travelers simply wanted a meal, a bath, and a night’s sleep. All of these were provided. The bath was no more than a closed off room into which some of Akhtar Ali’s people brought large buckets of hot and cold water and a metal jug. Bathing involved dipping the jug in turn into the hot and cold buckets and pouring its mixed contents over the body. If the mixing wasn’t correct, the experience could be “invigorating.”

An invigorated Sikander slept that night a deep and restful sleep. He longed to learn the conclusion of his enchanting dream. It had lingered in his waking mind, like some half-finished TV drama, but asleep, there was no such luck.

Any dreams Sikander had were forgotten when he awoke the next morning to an especially loud [azaan](#) from somewhere in the village. His first thought was to raise his mentor. This time he’d be ready for Abdul Latif, who had obviously needed more rest from the prior day’s journey. Shaking him vigorously and grinning, Sikander managed to jar him into consciousness. Abdul Latif wasn’t slow to awaken. His eyes opened abruptly as he quickly gathered his senses—a survival instinct born of the troubled times. Focusing on Sikander’s face, he emitted a soft chuckle, acknowledging the payback.

After performing the dawn prayer together with some of the villagers, Abdul Latif’s troop gathered their mules, bid [salaams](#) to the villagers, and proceeded downhill from Showlghar to the west. In less than an hour, they were at the bottom of the slopes and the terrain allowed them much easier passage than their approach to Showlghar had done the previous day.

For several kilometers the [Spin Ghar](#) stretched in a southwesterly direction before turning almost due west. Their peaks defined the border of Nangarhar with Pakistan. Just as they had done when crossing the large plain the previous day, Abdul Latif decided to use the natural shadows cast by the mountains to provide cover for as long as the sun remained low enough.

They made good progress toward Baro. Farther north, the sun began to illuminate the gently sloping plains that led all the way to the Jalalabad-to-Torkhum road about fifteen kilometers in the distance. Dust trails could be seen from truck convoys moving back and forth between Torkhum and Kabul. The mountains behind the travelers kept them in the shade for a while longer as the peaks draped long westward shadows over the plain, almost pointing the way to Laghar Juy. Abdul Latif used the opportunity to bring Sikander alongside him.

“See that shadow, fourth from the right? Do you see its tip? That’s where we live and where we’ll be [inshaAllah](#) tonight.”

The thought of finally being back home gave Abdul Latif’s voice a noticeably upbeat tone, but he wasn’t about to abandon his instinctive caution.

“It’s too dangerous to make a straight run for it,” he noted. “Not with these weapons and mules. But at least you can see it now. Keep it in your sight while we head—”

Abruptly, Abdul Latif came to a halt and lifted up his right hand. Everyone stopped. He paused for a moment, and then a transformed look came over his face. Immediately, he directed the men to move deeper into the folds of the hills. He had heard the unmistakable sound of a Shaytan-arba, or “devil’s chariot.”

Sikander heard nothing. *Probably imagined something. Perhaps with all that talk last night*, he thought. Still, despite the extra effort, it didn’t seem wise to be the only one to ignore Abdul Latif’s order.

“Quickly!” urged Abdul Latif with a sternness that needed no shouting. The warning infused Sikander’s step with an extra level of urgency. His companions deftly climbed up the shadowy slopes, but at this altitude despite his youth and relative fitness, he was no match for them.

Leaving Kala with the others, Ejaz came back to relieve Sikander of Neela, freeing Sikander to find his footing and with a little effort, to join the rest of them in a deep crevice in the mountainside. As Ejaz followed with Neela, a piece of rock that had promised more, failed his right foot and dislodged. He tumbled and lost his grip of Neela’s bridle and of about fifteen meters of mountainside before he could arrest his slide. A short streak of blood painted the mountain slope. Looking on from the safety of the crevice, Sikander grimaced.

Saleem sprang from his hiding point to rescue his brother, while Abdul Majeed came out to retrieve Neela from where Ejaz had let her go. Abdul Latif fixed his gaze on the chopper whose sound was now audible to everyone.

It was a Hind—beginning with “H” as with all NATO codenames for Soviet helicopters. The name had found its way into [mujahideen](#) usage through their interaction with the Pakistani [ISI](#), who in turn had picked it up from CIA contacts. To the Soviets, it was an Mi-24.

Always harbingers of destruction, the five titanium rotor blades chopped the air with their signature twenty-beats-per-second. Less than three kilometers away to the east was a visibly growing black dot silhouetted against the sky and maintaining a roughly constant fifty meters from the mountain slopes.

Abdul Majeed quickly brought Neela into the crevice to join the others. Saleem helped Ejaz to his feet but the brothers stayed low and moved slowly. To move meant being picked off against such a vast stationary backdrop. They also knew, however, that they had to get far from the rocks freshly disturbed by Ejaz’s slide, which if noticed by the crew of the airborne death-dealer, would lead them to investigate. The two crept a little higher up the slope and as far west of it as they could.

Stay put! That’s it; behind those boulders until the gunship flies past... Sikander’s eyes darted between the men and the helicopter. Its flight path would bring it past them, about forty meters farther out from the mountain. If they could remain hidden from the crew’s line of sight they’d be safe.

The Hind was a flying tank. Against its armor an [AK-47’s](#) 7.62mm rounds would have the effectiveness of blow darts. This much was clear to Abdul Latif. A 23mm round was the minimum caliber that would penetrate the helicopter—even the cockpit glass was virtually bulletproof.

That’s right. Don’t change course. Just keep flying and show me your butt, Abdul Latif prayed, his lips mouthing the silent words. *Do that and I*

just might show you something you won't forget. The helicopter proceeded obediently.

The pilot and gunner were chatting. They were bored. It had already been a long morning and they weren't especially focused on the scene in front of them. The chain of mountains on their left extended sixty kilometers into the distance ahead of them. Boulders and rocks lay in the foreground. On their right was grassland—punctuated by scores of gullies and mountain streams—stretching all the way north to the Jalalabad-to-Torkhum Road. Nothing untoward seemed to be going on. Fortunately for the travelers, at that level up the slopes, detecting them in the visually noisy scene demanded more attention than this crew was willing to dedicate.

Maybe they're not searching. A routine patrol? Sikander mulled hopefully.

Saleem and Ejaz remained crouched behind a large boulder, constantly adjusting their position to remain out of view of the helicopter crew. To Sikander's relief, the helicopter flew past them until it was far enough to the west that everyone was now beyond the line of sight of its crew.

With a previously unseen agility Abdul Latif immediately untethered one of the [RPG](#) boxes, flipped it open and pulled out a grenade. Unstrapping a launcher, he readied it for firing. The shuffling drew Sikander's attention from the helicopter as he gazed in puzzlement upon Abdul Latif. They had talked about their weapons earlier, and according to Abdul Majeed, the [RPG](#) was only effective against armored personnel carriers or tanks.

As the Hind was now about five hundred meters to the west, Abdul Latif gestured to the two brothers to hurry back to the crevice as he loaded the [RPG](#) into the launcher, and stepped out to find a location that would leave room for the jet blast from the back of the launcher.

Why does he want to use it now? Sikander wondered, as it was clear the helicopter crew had failed to notice them. But this was not the time to interrupt his mentor.

By the time Abdul Latif found a natural cavity in the rocks behind him, the helicopter was some seven hundred meters away. Aiming carefully, he squeezed the launcher's trigger. An orange tongue leapt out of the launcher's rear, licking and scorching the rock behind it. In the opposite direction, the grenade hurtled skyward. The calm air, Abdul Latif's aim, and no small amount of luck delivered it to its destination.

It exploded within five meters of the helicopter. The engine sputtered. One of the blades shed a third of its length, and fell away. In a split second a bright orange flash erupted from the engines, followed by two or three much larger flashes, from within the helicopter. A couple of seconds later, the spectacle was followed by the sounds it had authored. What used to be a helicopter was now a cloud of fragments, each rushing from the explosion's epicenter then arcing back to the ground below. The crew had no time to radio any message. It was a clean kill. The last piece of burning debris fell, trailing a streamer of black smoke. It was the torso of the pilot, fused by the heat to the back of his seat, a detail not visible to the [mujahideen](#) almost a kilometer away. What had a moment earlier been engaged in idle chitchat on a routine patrol mission was now a ghastly lump of smoldering aluminum, fabric, plastic, flesh, and bone.

"[Allahu Akbar!](#)" came the cry from Abdul Latif, followed by his companions. Stunned, Sikander joined the tail end of their proclamation just in time to seem to be in unison. After the victory cry, Abdul Latif turned to focus on Ejaz's injury. He tore off a clean piece of Ejaz's [gamees](#) to use as a bandage, washed the injury from his water flask and began wrapping it up.

Sikander pondered the events he had just witnessed. There had been a primitive, almost simian quality in Abdul Latif's [takbeer](#)—an animal's victory cry, oddly intoned within the human acknowledgment of God's supremacy, it was a sound that Sikander would never forget. Abdul Latif had revealed something of himself and Sikander felt a new tinge of fear of his mentor. Still unable to grasp the human dimensions of the moment, his mind slid toward the more palatable subject of its technicalities. Based on what he had understood of the grenade, he continued puzzling over the effectiveness of the tactic. He plucked up the courage to ask Abdul Latif how he had successfully used an antitank weapon against a helicopter. With the poise of a mentor, Abdul Latif explained.

"If you set the grenade to self-destruct, as a safety feature it'll do so about nine hundred meters from launch. It's to prevent unexploded [RPGs](#) from lying around dangerously. But when it destroys itself, its airburst can behave like an antiaircraft weapon. It can work, especially if the explosion hits something near the back of the engine or near the rotor hub. That Hind was armed with ground attack weapons but didn't use them.

AFGHANISTAN (Nangarhar Province)

Laghari
Juy

Contact with
Mi-24
Helicopter

Takhto
Kalay

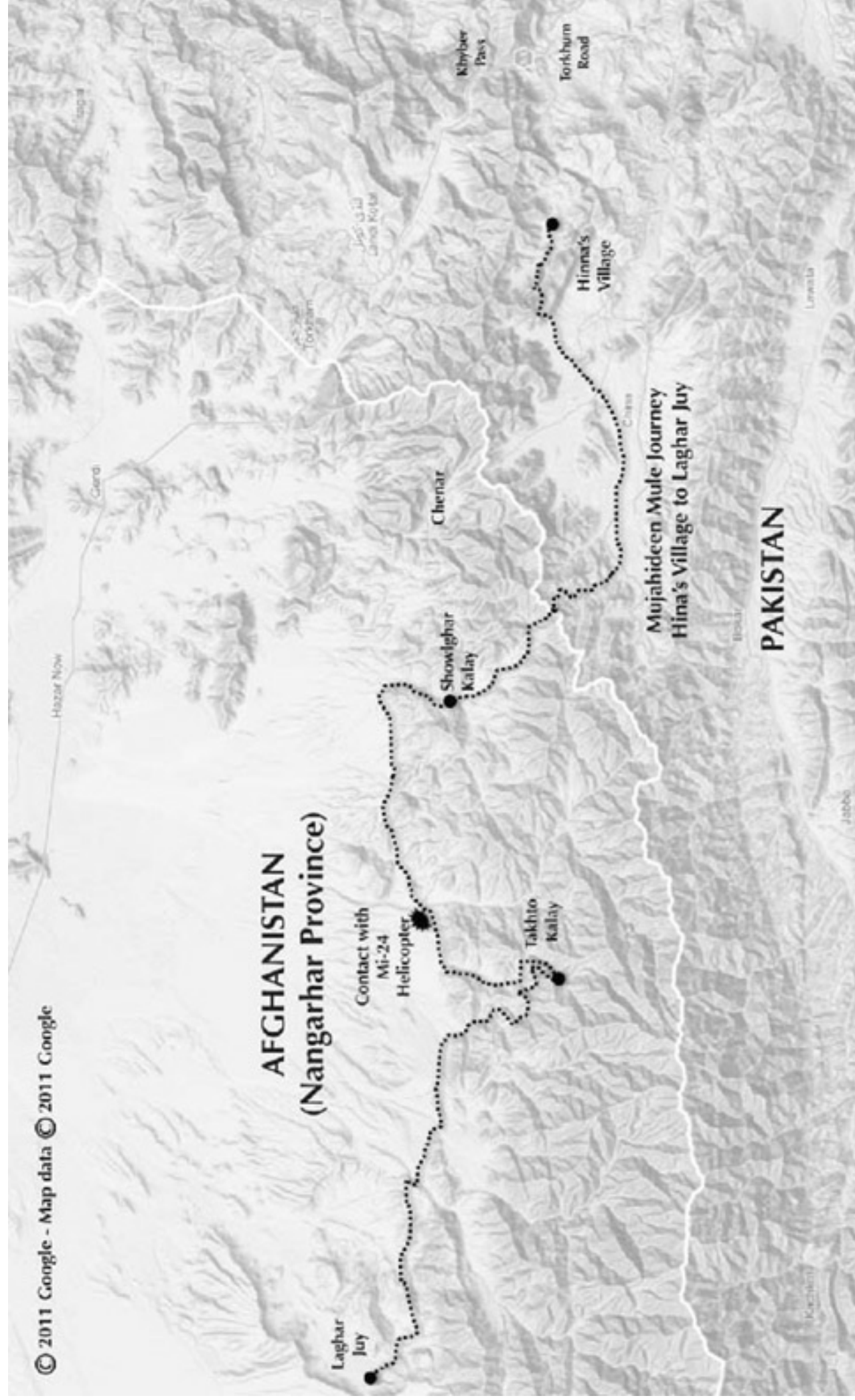
Showlghar
Kalay

Chenar

Hinna's
Village

Mujahideen Mule Journey
Hina's Village to Laghar Juy

PAKISTAN



“They clearly hadn’t seen us. If I’d missed, it might have gone unnoticed by the crew. If it *had* been noticed, they would have seen only an explosion but no indication of where it came from.”

Sikander’s awestruck expression pleased Abdul Latif as he finished tending to Ejaz’s ankle. There was no remorse on the man’s face—only the pleasure of knowing that the Soviet devil incarnate had taken another blow. But the satisfaction was superficial. It was impossible for someone of Abdul Latif’s sensibilities to be completely unaffected by the act of killing, even after seeing it in abundance.

Whatever comfort Abdul Latif might have drawn from downing the helicopter, he knew that in less than hour it would soon be missed. After maybe another hour, a search mission would no doubt be assembled and the [DRA](#) or Russians would be crisscrossing the region with as many helicopters as could be spared. Abdul Latif had to hurry to put distance between this event and his group. They needed the protection of higher ground, and passing through Baro was out of the question now.

With distance their priority, in less than two hours they would have to move at least five kilometers from their present location. Abdul Latif decided they would first descend to lower elevations to make the going easier, and then climb up the craggy mountain slopes at the last moment to evade whatever forces might be coming. Mountain shadows were only available in the deepest crevices, as the higher sun had now made the slopes shadowless. Abdul Latif needed every inch of cover he could find and he scoured the mountainside seeking out its most promising natural features.

Ejaz could move with only a little difficulty so he gave up Kala to Abdul Latif and limped alongside Abdul Rahman. A wave of guilt came over Sikander. It was, after all, his faltering attempt to catch up with the others, that had prompted Ejaz’s assistance. Had he been a little quicker, things might have been different. Now he owed Ejaz and he felt the obligation gnaw at him as he saw his friend limping.

“[JazaakAllah](#) for coming out to help me, brother,” he said. “Will you be all right? I’m sorry I put you through that. Really sorry.”

“You’re my brother in [jihad](#),” explained Ejaz, with the slightest hint of a frown joining his signature smile. “Please don’t discuss it anymore.” Ejaz’s perspective wasn’t one of etiquette. He had genuinely needed the subject to be dropped. In his own sense of [badal](#), he didn’t want his creditor status diluted by apologies.

The plan to descend to lower ground proved effective. In only an hour they progressed the desired five kilometers without any kind of enemy response. Abdul Latif periodically gazed into the distance, sometimes toward Jalalabad and sometimes toward Torkhum. No gunships appeared to be flying. *They’re probably still guessing what happened when they lost contact with the crew*, thought Sikander.

Satisfied that they were far enough from the wreckage to evade detection, Abdul Latif directed the men to climb back up the slopes. About twenty minutes later, they could see a Mi-8 “Hip” and another Hind nearing the debris left by the downed helicopter. The lingering remnant of a pillar of black smoke that had formed where the wreckage had fallen was not hard to locate. The Hip landed to disgorge its troops while the Hind hovered, maintaining watch over the scene. Abdul Latif couldn’t make out how many troops emerged from the helicopter, but he guessed it might have been eight or ten. Whatever their number, after briefly examining the wreckage, they spread out into three groups to secure a perimeter, remove significant debris, and check the local terrain for signs of a cause of the catastrophe.

“[Alhamdulillah](#)!” exclaimed a gleeful Abdul Latif. “Sikander, young man, you must be lucky for us. The Soviets are being careful. They either don’t know yet what they’re up against or they think there’s been an accident. They’ll want to investigate and not risk any more aircraft without knowing what happened. If we’re lucky, they won’t see it was an [RPG](#) and there aren’t any bullet holes or other signs of combat. The explosions that disintegrated the helicopter came mostly from their onboard munitions. If I were their commander I’d want to know what brought it down before committing a large troop force, and that’s going to give us more time. Besides, he’ll probably radio back to his superiors before making a move.”

As they headed west, the mountains to their left continued for another sixty kilometers. The peaks in this part of the [Spin Ghar](#) were significantly taller than their Pakistani Safed Koh counterparts. Reaching as high as four thousand meters, the protection they offered in the present circumstances was too tempting to resist. Abdul Latif led his [mujahideen](#) troop around to face the mountains, making the usual switchbacks to gain altitude. The more elevation they gained, the greater the advantage to spot any airborne Soviet threats. Threats from the ground would be even easier to notice but were much less likely. With the sun high over the plains, giving the travelers a well-lit position, they could make good progress into the mountains toward Takhto [Kalay](#), while periodically looking back to monitor for approaching threats.

Takhto was a small village of mud houses dotted among steep terraced hills. Abdul Latif knew it well. It was not far from Laghar Juy, and although the latter lived off its own agriculture, some of Takhto’s more exotic produce was often brought down from the mountains by mule to be sold in the villages, including Laghar Juy, nestled in the gentler slopes below.

For many of the villages between the [Spin Ghar](#) and the Jalalabad-to-Torkhum road, Soviet attacks would result in long stretches of time when much of the agricultural land became little more than a moonscape. Likewise, village homes were easily demolished by the bombing. While rebuilding everything, villagers would often look to places like Takhto as a source of food.

Over the years, this frequent interaction created new relationships and one of these was between Abdul Latif and Azam Ahmed [Khan](#), of Takhto. But it had been several months since he’d been there, so Abdul Latif had to ask the welcoming villagers to point them to Azam’s house. Azam’s son, Humayun, was home. He also knew Abdul Latif, though a little less well than did his father.

“[Abaa](#) isn’t far. He’s in the fields and should be back shortly,” Humayun told him. “Please. Come in and rest yourselves.”

The mules were duly unpacked and the supplies and weapons hastily shuffled into an adjacent outdoor compound surrounded by a mud-brick wall.

Now that they had the chance to rest their legs and eat, there was a tension in the air, reflecting the events of earlier that day. Everyone was somber and not especially inclined toward chatter. There was a minor break from the melancholy when Azam finally arrived and he and Abdul Latif gave each other a welcoming hug. After a few pleasantries, his wife, not wanting to lose the opportunity, prompted Azam to ask Abdul Latif if he wouldn’t mind taking some fruit and vegetables to one of her friends, Aamina, down in Laghar Juy.

Abdul Latif solemnly led the [maghrib](#) prayer. Afterwards, he, Abdul Rahman, and Abdul Majeed sat in a corner of the main room of the house and read from the [Qur’an](#). Sikander remained seated, imagining how barely five days earlier he had been studying Shakespeare, watching TV, and engaging in thought-provoking debates about Afghanistan. Ejaz nursed his ankle, cleaning the wound once more, while Saleem could do little more than stroll outside the house pondering how close he and his brother had come to dying and how that would have affected their mother and sister.

For the feelings occupying the men that evening, a new day was needed to return to their normal selves. When the day broke, hoping to lift their spirits, Abdul Latif reminded everyone that they were now mere hours from home. Immediately after [fajr](#) they made ready for their final descent toward Laghar Juy. Depending on what they saw, they would either continue onto the plain and join Laghar Juy’s meandering stream into the village proper, or

remain higher up in the mountains, cutting across each small brook and stream gully until they could approach the village more squarely from the rear. After bidding [salaams](#) to Azam and his family, the men were on their way.

The descent from Takhto was uneventful. They discovered no signs of nearby Soviet presence and the going was once again eased by the protection of the early morning [Spin Ghar](#) shadows. Abdul Latif had no desire to repeat the encounter of the previous day. Watchful for helicopter patrols, he and his troop moved cautiously at a modest elevation, following the mountain contours until they arrived at the headwaters of the stream that would lead them directly into Laghar Juy. After an hour's rest, they resumed their descent until finally, in the early afternoon, the village houses became discernable.

The travelers were soon spotted by the lookouts on the south side of the village. The villagers who had been posted there came out to greet them. Pleased with the safe return of their kinsfolk, the lead lookout gave a defiant [takbeer](#): "[Allahu Akbar!](#)" upon seeing the several mules carrying weapons and much needed supplies. Abdul Latif gestured to one of them to take care of the mules and to move the supplies into the village store, where food and weapons were generally kept.

Reluctantly, Sikander gave up Neela's bridle. He had grown fond of her, with her docile nature and hardiness. His impression of mules had been generally negative until this experience, and he had expected more difficulty eliciting Neela's cooperation, but she had been a willing animal with remarkable intelligence and skill in negotiating the rocky terrain.

Abdul Latif and his troop entered the village casually bearing their weapons over their shoulders. As he strolled deeper into Laghar Juy with his companions, Sikander saw the remains of ruined mud-brick houses or partly destroyed walls amid other intact and occupied homes. Several individuals came to greet him as an "extra" [mujahid](#) and he acknowledged them warmly. Such acceptance was heartening, especially coming from people so hard-pressed by the times and so often beset by the need to rebuild their meager homes not once, but maybe two or three times, after successive bombing attacks.

Sikander was filled with thoughts of Hayatabad and his family. Aside from the overwhelming desire to contact them, he experienced the sting of guilt at how oblivious he'd been to the plight of the Afghans, how superficial and pretentious his own life now seemed, and how, despite the very real stress of his family's economic situation on his parents, it all seemed so meaningless compared with the reality in front of him.

Another kind of guilt had visited Sikander from time to time during the journey, a guilt that he felt once more now. He realized how different it was to actually live this war than to have safely intellectual debates about it with class fellows. Ego and ignorance had each been healthily dented by his brief encounter thus far with this war's harsh realities.

Razya was a stoic. She, her sister-in-law, and niece, were planning to dine together. As she crouched by her low mud-brick stove, preparing the charcoal that was to be used for that day's cooking, she lit the fire.

War had dominated their lives for almost seven years, and prior to that, things had not been very peaceful under the Afghan communist regime following the Saur revolution. Razya's response had been to grow a thick skin and pray each day for nothing to happen to her precious husband or sons. She had, however, resigned herself to receiving one day a fateful message, and in her own mind, without ever discussing it, had rehearsed her reaction to such a calamity. It was just her way of being prepared.

This was not to be that day. Abdul Latif and his men entered his house and called out Razya's name. She beamed, a wave of relief coursing through her, as she murmured a thankful prayer for their safe return. Rising up, she locked eyes with his and exclaimed in full voice, "[Khan!](#) You're back! [Alhamdulillah!](#)"

Without frenzied embrace, Razya acknowledged the men's arrival, continuing to smile. The twelve, stifling days of her family's absence were over and she could breathe again.

Abdul Latif looked upon his wife and sighed. He had borne the responsibility for his sons and nephews and was pleased to be relieved of the burden. He allowed himself a moment or two of rest and a glass of water, before rising to his feet with the realization that he had become so familiar with Sikander's presence that he'd forgotten the need for an introduction. "Razya, we have a new [mujahid](#). Meet young Sikander [Khan](#)."

Sikander politely acknowledged the introduction, and then fleetingly looked at his friends and back toward Abdul Latif. Understanding the glance, Abdul Latif turned to his nephews.

"Saleem, Ejaz, let's get both of you back home. It's been long enough. Sikander, you can come too if you like."

It was only proper for Abdul Latif to see to it that Saleem and Ejaz were reunited with their mother and sister. After all, no husband or father was returning to them. Still, that would do little to dampen their delight at seeing the safe return of the two young men. But their uncle had to be the one to escort them home or, at the very least, give them permission to go.

"Abdul Rahman, Abdul Majeed, help our people to offload the mules and give those things we picked up in Takhto to your mother here—Razya, they're for Aamina. You boys see to your mother's needs and I'll be back shortly." Satisfied that his instructions would be followed, he turned to Sikander, Saleem and Ejaz.

"So, let's go break the good news to your mother!"

"*Good news?* What good news?" came the question from behind his back. For the briefest of moments, Sikander noticed an expression he had never seen on Abdul Latif's face.

Razya listened intently as her husband explained everything that had culminated in the proposed engagement between Ejaz and Hinna. When Abdul Latif described how Yaqub and his wife had agreed, Razya let out a joyful shriek. But on its heels came a realization that prompted her to frown. "[Khan!](#) You were going to go to Noor's house and let *her* know without telling *me*?"

It would, of course, be completely unacceptable to dishonor Abdul Latif with anything like a scolding in front of his own sons, particularly with a stranger like Sikander present. Achieving the same goal, however, Razya aimed a narrow-eyed stare at her husband, before continuing.

"[Khan](#), I think such matters are really best discussed between women, and besides, whatever Noor thinks of this arrangement, she's unlikely to reveal her true feelings to you. Don't you agree?"

Abdul Latif nodded sheepishly.

"Why then, let me go with you and I'll be the one to explain how—auspicious?—such a marriage might be?" she offered as she cocked an eyebrow, looking past her husband into the eyes of Ejaz.

Ejaz was obliged to study the smooth dirt floor when her eyes met his. He allowed himself just a simple nod and the hint of a smile to let his aunt know that she was indeed being wise.

"Well, then, Abdul Rahman, you and Abdul Majeed had better come with us too," Abdul Latif declared, with relief and resignation. They were happy to oblige and after Razya hastily doused her fire, the seven of them proceeded to Noor's house, no more than fifty meters away.

Coincidentally, Noor had just left her home with her daughter, Rabia, heading for Razya's house to help prepare dinner and to gossip. Suddenly, Rabia darted out in front of Noor, who noticed now that she was hastening toward the seven approaching figures walking down the dirt street. Seeing both her sons, Noor recalled the scene on a day barely nine months earlier when such a group had returned from the Zhawar campaign without her Abdus Sami, initiating in a single moment a whole new course for her life, and numbering her among the burgeoning ranks of Afghanistan's widows. The thought, combined with the joy of seeing her returning offspring, caused her to weep and smile at the same time. Though her boys had been away only twelve days, every such trip was perilous and every return a source of blessed relief.

The group came together and after the usual hugs of welcome and expressions of [salaams](#), all of them turned and headed to Abdul Latif's home, where preparations for dinner would resume, but now on a substantially larger scale. After the hubbub, with everyone regrouped at Razya's house, Noor beckoned to Saleem to approach her. He obeyed and with his head lowered in respect, she said a blessing prayer in silence as she gently stroked his head. Ejaz was next, but as he limped toward her, Noor's face fell.

"Ejaz? You're hurt. What happened?"

Abdul Latif and the young men exchanged glances. No one had bothered to suggest a rehearsal of how the incident might be explained to the family.

"Ejaz, uh, lost his footing in the mountains," Abdul Latif said dismissively. "Hm! You'd have thought he'd never been up there the way he was handling himself with his mind so preoccu...pied." Having uttered most of the last word before realizing where it would land him, his eyes went to Razya.

"Noor," said Razya, gathering her thoughts and smiling at her sister-in-law. "Let's go into the back and chat, shall we? These men are tired after so many days coming across the mountains. Let them rest and we'll make dinner. I've something to tell you anyway."

Noor and Razya, followed by Rabia, proceeded to the rear of the home where the stove fire awaited resurrection. Around the stove were a handful of [patthras](#). Razya, Noor and Rabia took one each and promptly sat down.

"Noor," began Razya, "as you know, Ejaz is now, [mashAllah](#), a fine young [Pashtun](#) and I think it's certainly about time he was with a wife. Don't you?"

"Why, yes I...in fact, I'd been thinking about—" Before she could finish Razya continued, having received the all-important affirmative.

"Well, Noor, Allah moves his hand as he wills. [Khan](#) had to lead the men through a different route from the one they usually use. They came through a village in the area where [Khan](#) Jehangir lives?"

Noor nodded her acknowledgment.

Razya completed the description of their encounter and the subsequent engagement. "My [Khan](#) felt that this girl would be a perfect match for your Ejaz and was sure you'd understand his concern for Ejaz's wellbeing and future, so he put the question to Yaqub." Saying as much as she had, Razya paused for Noor to digest her announcement.

"I see," said Noor, encompassing all that was either possible or necessary at that moment.

Razya's eyes widened. "Well, *imagine* his delight when Yaqub said he thought such a relationship would help increase the kinship between the [Afridis](#) and the [Shinwaris](#), you see?" Razya was sure she was making progress.

The glint of late afternoon sunlight reflected off the watery edge of Noor's eyes. "Yes. Yes, I do see," she offered, wearing a vacant look. An ordinary emotional moment would have seen Noor pick up slack in her [dupattha](#) and wipe her eyes with it. On this occasion, however, she was immobilized and did nothing to stop the glistening streaks now rolling down her face.

Ever since her husband's passing, Noor had become withdrawn. She rarely said much and if she did, it was only after introspection. At this moment, she imagined her husband coming home with such news. She imagined him feeling proud of his son's stepping up to the next phase of his adult life to marry and bring forth children to carry on the family and the clan. Finally, letting out a soft whimper, she leaned her head into Razya's shoulder and wept. For all her stoicism Razya was not heartless. No explanation was needed.

Rabia, meanwhile, looked on in silence, absorbing the moment in sadness, joy, and fascination.

"Noor, Noor," Razya soothed. "This is a time of joy for your Ejaz, not sadness." Nothing more needed saying, and Razya hugged her, allowing Noor the time she needed to regain her composure.

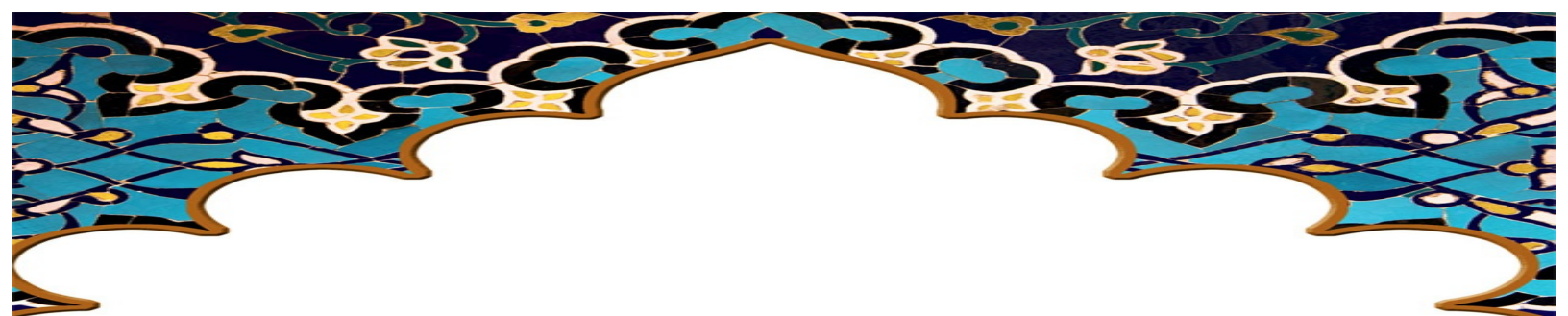
"Razya," said Noor, sniffing, "my children are your children. Today I'm thankful to the Almighty that he had me bear two sons and that they fight in his name. May Allah grant Brother Abdul Latif a long life and bless him for his kind consideration for my Ejaz." She paused to take a breath.

"Where would I have gone? What would have become of us if your family hadn't been there for us? No. If Brother Abdul Latif has seen a girl he believes is fitting for my Ejaz, then [w'Allahi](#), I'm content." Noor rose to go into the main room of the house.

"Brother Abdul Latif," she began, looking beyond him to stare into the eyes of Ejaz, "it seems you've...procured an addition to our family?" Ejaz looked away. "Ejaz, come here," she beckoned in her most motherly tone, and as he responded, he instinctively bowed his head for her to bless him a second time, delighted and relieved that the news had now been broken to his mother.

As the group settled down to discuss their adventures Abdul Latif introduced Sikander to Noor and Rabia. Rabia was intrigued by the stranger. Never having been to Pakistan, she found his short description of himself to be fascinating. She was a year younger than Sikander, and though her education was rudimentary, it was better than that of most people in the village. Until his death, her father had routinely obtained [Pashto](#) reading material for her whenever he made a trip to Jalalabad.

In the late afternoon, the introductions dispensed with and with time to unwind, Sikander stepped outside. While wandering, he absorbed the atmosphere. Children played. The men sat drinking [chai](#) or smoking [charss](#), and the women watched over the children while doing their housework. There was an air of contentment with life, despite its obvious hardships. The contrast with the faster-paced Hayatabad could hardly have been greater. There, everyone seemed bent on either accumulating possessions or devoting their energies toward protecting those already acquired. Here before him, however, in this tiny village of Laghar Juy, amid privations compounded by war, Sikander saw and felt simplicity and truth. He was wholly unprepared for its seductiveness. But seduced he was.



Chapter 5

Ambush

ABDUL LATIF HAD BEEN BACK a week and his fellow [jirga](#) elders and he were concerned about the possibility of a surprise attack. They had also enlisted trustworthy lookouts in Anarbagh, watching the Jalalabad-to-Torkhum road, but there had been nothing to report. With the approaching end of August, however, much as Junaid had predicted, word began arriving from Jalalabad that a tank force was gathering near the airport, where at least a dozen Hind gunships were also stationed. [Mujahideen](#) commander Jalaluddin Haqqani came to Laghar Juy to discuss a plan to ambush the tanks.

Haqqani was a slender man whose turban seemed disproportionately large for his body. His long beard bore signs of frequent dyeing with [henna](#), resulting in its few gray hairs becoming a bright tangerine color whenever the dye began to wear off. He seemed older but was generally acknowledged to be less than 40, Haqqani had made a name for himself under [Maulwi](#) Yunus Khalis by leading his forces with great tenacity, rarely retreating from [DRA](#) or Soviet counter-attacks. He frequently traveled to and from Pakistan, where he maintained a residence and strong ties to the [ISI](#) as an effective funnel for weapons and money.

In Laghar Juy, Haqqani called together the local [jirga](#) and a few of the other senior [mujahideen](#) to strategize. As head of military affairs for the [jirga](#), Abdul Latif was one of them, and he brought along Abdul Rahman, Ejaz, and Sikander to share in the planning. Haqqani's force for this operation currently consisted of about forty men. He was counting on Abdul Latif to be good for five to ten additional fighters.

"The tank buildup near the airport is real. We have to destroy this force before it gets too large, even if it must be in Jalalabad," noted Haqqani. "If they get to Hazar Now to defend the new garrison being established there, they'll present a much bigger threat to the villages in this area. And all *we'll* have left will be mountain caves. We have to stop them."

Abdul Latif listened intently before making a proposal.

"Brother Jalal, what if we were to let them stream out of Jalalabad? They'd have to pass through Batawul, where there are plenty of small buildings and other natural obstacles. They'll be forced to move in a column. We could then hit the trailing tank followed immediately by their lead tank. It would put the rest of them in some confusion, boxed in by the wrecked tanks and the natural obstacles to their left and right. If we can force them into such a fix, we could create a killing zone on the road."

"That *would* be my approach, too, Abdul Latif," responded Jalaluddin, "but the column will likely be escorted by helicopters, and even if it isn't, their tank commanders will be able to call for them during any attack. They could be over Batawul in minutes."

"It's a possibility, of course, Brother Jalal," Abdul Latif nodded, "but if we could create a nuisance barrage of [RPG](#) fire against any helicopter cover, they'd be drawn into responding or have to move out of range. Either way, they wouldn't be protecting tanks. And as long as *we're prepared* for helicopters, it doesn't matter if they come as escorts or later after being called in. Besides, in less than twenty minutes, most of the damage would be done."

"We can station our primary force on the hills to the north and south of the road at Mar Koh near Batawul. If the helicopters withdraw to higher altitude, or move out, we can redirect our air defense force on the tanks, and if the helicopters remain engaged," Abdul Latif suspended a shrug, "[w'Allahi](#)...we'll bring them down."

"Bring them *down*?" Jalaluddin was startled.

With a gleam in his eye, Abdul Latif described the encounter with the Hind on his way back from Pakistan.

"It isn't easy, but if we attack the helicopters in groups of two or three of us, we'll at least distract them, maybe destroy them. Either way our main force will be free to hit the tanks."

Jalaluddin was amazed. "[SubhanAllah](#)! Abdul Latif. I uh...don't suppose you can teach this skill?"

Abdul Latif grinned.

Jalaluddin paused to consider how to deploy his men to take maximum advantage of the proposal. His eyes didn't take long to signal that a plan had taken shape.

"Let's have sixteen men target helicopters and twenty to hit the tanks. The twenty should be split to have six at the rear of the column, four at the road intersection in Batawul between the river bridge and the Mar Koh hills, and ten at the hills themselves. The groups at the rear and on the hills should split equally on the north and south sides of the road. The four at the intersection should attack from the south side. The rear groups will wait under the river bridge and attack the rear tank after it passes. We'll use the hit to signal the group at the intersection to knock out the nearest approaching tank, and let it sit there blocking any escape out of the intersection. The men on the hills will likewise use the rear tank's destruction as the cue to attack the lead vehicle."

"For air defense, we'll use the same hills, but Abdul Latif, place your men higher up and focus on their helicopters. Keep six on each side, dedicated to that. Put the remaining two on each side to create a rearguard in case of attack from the east. The rest of us will be at the roadside at the eastern end of Batawul to mop up escaping enemies."

It was about as improbable as an eighty-year-old grandmother parallel parking a Ferrari. *This ragtag [Pashtun](#) seems to have a real grasp of military tactics*, mused Sikander, listening to the commander.

Sikander tried to focus on the mechanics of the plan. Unable to sustain a vacuum of conscience, however, he was drawn into contemplating the plan's certain brutality. Sure, he could think in terms of tanks, helicopters, and grenades, but there was no getting away from what would happen to people. It would be no newspaper article, no TV documentary, nor one of those American war movies he'd seen at home. This would be real. It would be up close. He was on a path, not simply to witness real slaughter, but to engage in it.

His body trembled; a response he fought to bring under control. Each time he seemed to have done so, however, the trembling resurged, forcing him once again to fight it. Relaxing had never been such hard work.

Looking skyward, Jalaluddin noted the sun had passed its zenith and gestured to one of his young stalwarts. "Omar, call the [azaan](#) for [zuhr](#) prayer."

Everyone, minus four lookouts, joined in the prayer, with Jalaluddin in the role of [imam](#). When it was over, he gathered his entourage and bid [salaams](#) to Abdul Latif and his men, saying: "We'll send word when we learn of the tank column's movement." Careful not to move in a single group, Haqqani withdrew himself and his people, trekking back to higher ground.

A few kilometers to the west of Laghar Juy up in the mountain slopes were the caves of the [Spin Ghar](#), fortified with CIA help to enable storing of arms, supplies, and other equipment. Among them, the cave complex of [Tora Bora](#) was the preferred place to hide whenever an attack on local villages appeared imminent. The Soviets understood it would be foolhardy to try to dislodge an enemy from those caves as the occupants would either dig in or quickly disperse and regroup elsewhere. Haqqani and his force would be relatively safe there and could easily cross the short distance into Pakistan if need be.

Back home, Abdul Latif pondered the task he'd taken on. He was clear about what he had to accomplish. Scanning his boys, his eyes settled on Sikander and with his familiar, wry grin, he uttered, "[Mujahid](#), it's time we got you equipped and trained."

Abdul Latif directed Abdul Majeed to take Sikander to the highest ground in the village where men would often go to practice small arms fire.

Sikander was to be trained to use the Kalashnikov [AK-47](#). Abdul Majeed led the way to a nearby friend's house where he asked to borrow the man's rifle. Reassured that it would be returned to him, the young man reluctantly handed it over and Sikander and Abdul Majeed continued up the hill to a spot behind a ruined house.

"I'll set up some targets and show you how to make the best use of this weapon," Abdul Majeed said.

He disappeared behind a mud-brick wall, picked up some small rocks and set them on the meter-high rubble that formed about two thirds of the back wall of the ruin. Returning to Sikander, he began with the most basic instructions by holding out an empty clip.

"This clip holds thirty rounds and here," Abdul Majeed pulled out several rounds from his bandolier and started loading them in the clip, as he continued, "this is how you put them in. You try."

Sikander took the clip and did as he was asked, finding it to be surprisingly easy.

"Then you insert it like this." Abdul Majeed demonstrated how to push the banana-shaped clip into the underside of the weapon, its lower end curving forward. The clip slid in and latched. Once this was done, he pulled back the slide to load the first round.

"See?"

Sikander nodded, finding none of this challenging, except pondering the lethality of each round and what it might mean as the terminal entity of a hapless soldier's life.

Abdul Majeed continued. "Let's try hitting some rocks and knocking them off that wall. Aim so that the back sight here—" he pointed to the rear V-shaped sight, "has the front sight in the middle. If you're within fifty meters of your target, be sure to aim for the body."

"Why?"

"Because the recoil can lift the barrel slightly. If it does, it'll give you more of a chance that the next bullet will hit the target. Both could hit the mark, but if your first shot isn't lethal, then your second one has a chance. Remember also, that for long range shots you need to lift the barrel slightly to compensate for the bullet's dropping along its path."

Sikander marveled at the nuanced understanding that nearly seven years of battling the enemy had given the [mujahideen](#). He longed to be fully trained and accepted as one of them.

Firmly gripping the rifle, he lay on his belly, took aim at the first rock, and for the first time in his life, squeezed a trigger. The rifle emitted three rounds in what seemed an instant. The rock didn't budge and evidenced no encounter with a bullet.

"*No, no!*" Abdul Majeed chided. "You didn't take time to *aim* and you held that trigger too tightly. Huh! You'll lose a lot of rounds too quickly if you do that! And you won't hit anything...except maybe your own friends!" His eyes creased above a scathing grin.

He's enjoying this! Sikander mused.

Soon, the world's easiest-to-learn assault weapon had claimed its latest adherent. Not only was Sikander knocking rocks the size of cantaloupes off their perches from fifty meters, he was also able to control his trigger finger's touch to let off just one or two rounds.

When this basic level of skill had been reached, Abdul Majeed walked over to a higher part of the boundary wall. With a small pebble, he scratched out the approximate outline of a human form with the oval representing the head at about the correct height. Within the outline, he drew a rough circle corresponding to the heart.

"Now we're going to practice controlled fire on one specific part of the body. You choose, Sikander."

Sikander chose the head. Abdul Majeed picked up the rifle, took aim, and fired. The first shot made its mark below the neckline, while the second hit just inside the upper edge of the face oval. "Not bad," Sikander muttered.

"See what I mean about the recoil lift? Now you try."

Sikander took the weapon and lay down on his belly again. He felt its weight and balance and took aim as he'd been instructed. The first shot missed the face below the right ear but the second one was just above where the nose might have been. "Very good!" lauded Abdul Majeed, gleeful at his student's progress. He didn't seem to mind a bit that Sikander's second shot was better than his own.

"All right now, most of the time your targets will be moving. So like you had to lift the gun slightly to compensate for a bullet's dropping, you'll have to aim slightly ahead of a moving target. That's something you judge."

The two of them continued practicing until finally Abdul Majeed declared, "Sikander, there's nothing more I can explain to you. You'll learn better now by practicing with the weapon. Let's hope you and everyone else survive the practice!"

Sikander allowed himself a cheerful grin as they strolled down the hill back to Abdul Latif's home after returning the borrowed rifle. Henceforth Sikander would be practicing as often as he could borrow a weapon.

It was common for Noor and Rabia to be over with Razya, helping with simple chores. With Sikander's standing as a new [mujahid](#) established, he found himself transitioning from the status of a [melmasthia](#) guest in Abdul Latif's household into an accepted family member. Noor, however, took pains to keep Rabia from much interaction with Sikander. Rabia was her only daughter and she didn't want any hint of impropriety. No amount of acceptance of Sikander would ever transform him into a [mehram](#), and as long as that was the case, whenever Noor and Rabia were there, he would have to maneuver awkwardly around the home to avoid coming into too close proximity to Rabia. For her own part, the characteristically independent teenager, simply glanced down, turned away or pulled her [dupattha](#) a little further forward when Sikander was present but otherwise showed no hint of shyness.

The wait for enemy tank movements seemed endless. During this time, a delegation of two [mujahideen](#), Aamir and Yassir, arrived from Pakistan, bringing more weapons, among them several [AK-47s](#). Sikander was delighted at the prospect, at last, of becoming the proud owner of one.

Having come through Yaqub's village, the two men had been persuaded to bring gifts from Yaqub's family. They also conveyed Yaqub's expectation of them returning to Pakistan with the confirmatory ring, among other engagement presents for Hinna.

Abdul Latif had obtained the ring during a day trip to Jalalabad near the end of August, immediately after returning from Pakistan. Like the recently sewn engagement outfit for Hinna and other gifts for her family, the ring awaited delivery and with Aamir and Yassir's return, that could now be accomplished.

Even so, he had expected to be done with the ambush by now and with the engagement-sealing items still languishing with him, the embarrassment of receiving gifts before formally sending those from his own side to the girl's family was hard to bear. The only mitigation would be to make the gifts from the groom's side all the more attractive.

Abdul Latif invited Aamir and Yassir to stay the night with him. The following morning after breakfast, the guests made ready with their mules outside Abdul Latif's home. Abdul Latif formally handed them the bride's ring, the engagement dress, a few small items of gold jewelry, and a small cloth wrap containing two hundred dollars.

Both Afghans and Pakistanis often found it useful to deal with each other in American dollars and by selling commodities in the bazaars in Peshawar, typically captured from Russian soldiers, Abdul Latif could readily obtain the currency.

He could also be confident that the travelers wouldn't abscond with the gifts. It would have been an invitation to be hunted down and killed by some of the most prolonged and painful killing methods ever practiced. Abdul Latif felt he had a nose for shadiness and neither Aamir nor Yassir fit the profile.

As Sikander watched, he gestured to Abdul Latif to speak to him alone. The two of them stepped back inside Abdul Latif's house and into the main room.

"Brother, I've been wondering if it might be possible to get a message back to my family. They should know that I'm well and unharmed and performing [inshaAllah](#) a worthy mission. These people are returning to Peshawar and I'd like them to take my message with them."

"How would you propose to get it delivered?"

"I think if you were to send a note back to Junaid and put my note to my parents inside that note, then perhaps—"

"Perhaps Junaid would be able to deliver your letter physically to the mailbox and avoid revealing his identity or your location?" Abdul Latif stroked his ample beard.

"Something like that," Sikander agreed, pleased with his mentor's understanding. "Junaid seems to have enough pull with the police to avoid suspicion in case there's some kind of watch on our house."

Abdul Latif strode toward the solitary tall metal cabinet against the wall of his main room, retrieving a notepad and pencil from its top shelf. He tore off a sheet and handing the pencil and the sheet to Sikander, he gestured toward a small rough table bathed in daylight. "Prepare the letter and let me have it when you're ready."

Sikander quickly penned the letter and handed it to Abdul Latif. Having confirmed that it lacked any security issues, Abdul Latif placed it in a sewn silk envelope and handed it to Aamir for Junaid's attention. With gifts for the bride and her family, sufficient provisions for the journey, and Sikander's letter, Aamir and Yassir were soon on their way back to Pakistan.

A day after the visitors left, word came from Anarbagh that some two-dozen tanks would be coming out of Jalalabad the following day heading toward Hazar Now, as Jalaluddin had anticipated. Omar, Jalaluddin's apprentice, was dispatched to Laghar Juy by horse to signal the launch of their ambush plan. Fortunately, it had been well rehearsed and Abdul Latif had already taught the [mujahideen](#) designated for air defense the self-destruct ruse with [RPGs](#). Omar immediately sought out Abdul Latif and told him that it was time to gather his men and get going.

Without delay, Abdul Latif directed Abdul Rahman to take the women and children to [Tora Bora](#). After making sure they were safely in the caves, he was to circle back to join the main force in Batawul. Most of Jalaluddin's men were waiting in Anarbagh so they had no need to race to an attack position with the same urgency as Abdul Latif, who had to cover thirty-five kilometers from Laghar Juy.

On the morning indicated, the [mujahideen](#) dispersed as planned. Six men tucked themselves under the bridge to the west of the built-up area in Batawul. The four that were to attack the central tanks took their positions under cover by some shops on the south side of the T-junction intersection in the center of Batawul.

Two hill formations lay on each side of the east-west road in Mar Koh, near the eastern edge of Batawul. The larger formation, reaching almost two hundred meters above the surrounding terrain, was on the north side of the road and the other much smaller one, at less than a hundred meters, was directly across on the south side. Near the tops of these hills Abdul Latif stationed his air defense fighters.

About halfway up each hill another five [mujahideen](#) were placed, to focus as planned on the lead tank. Like their fellow attackers at the intersection they were to strike that tank as soon as the first explosion signaled a successful hit on the trailing tank. If they could disable their target quickly, they would direct their attention to the next in line and move on toward the rear, descending from the hills as they did so. They were to meet up with their fellow fighters at the intersection, and ultimately, those coming from the rear. Ejaz and Saleem were among the men on the hills at the head end of the column, and Abdul Majeed was assigned to the road intersection.

Ten to fifteen seconds were all that could be hoped for before losing the ambush's element of surprise. Speed was essential.

Abdul Latif's air defense group was to focus solely on helicopters and to fire upon them incessantly as soon as they came within range. It would be sufficient to keep them distracted to prevent them from defending the tanks. It would be a bonus if one or two could be downed, but only if *all* gunships withdrew or were destroyed would it be acceptable for Abdul Latif's men to join their fellow fighters engaging the tanks.

At the eastern end of Batawul, Haqqani's twelve remaining [mujahideen](#) were deployed to catch escaping soldiers. Sikander was among them.

About forty minutes after the [mujahideen](#) had settled into their positions, the first of the T-62 tanks came rumbling through Batawul. They were in a widely spaced column about three kilometers long. Two hundred meters above them, a flight of four Hind helicopter gunships tracked the slowly moving formation, as ready as they would ever be to respond to any attack. They flew in a diamond pattern with the lead helicopter over the head end of the column, one left and one right flanking gunship, and one over the rear of the column but about seventy meters farther back from the trailing tank.

As soon as the trailing helicopter passed overhead, the six [mujahideen](#) sprang from under the bridge. With the trailing tank now almost a hundred meters down the road, they opened up with their [RPGs](#). Two grenades were launched, followed immediately by a second salvo. A third was held in reserve in case the first two missed their target, and in readiness for the tank in front of the trailing one, as soon as the latter came to a halt. The rear of a T-62's armor was notoriously weak. As the first two [RPGs](#) came screaming into the trailing tank, two large orange flashes preceded a billowing cloud of black smoke, announcing the hit as the vehicle came to a standstill.

For now, the forward tanks continued moving as if nothing had happened. As soon as Haqqani's men saw the smoke from the explosion at the rear of the column, those at the road junction launched their attack on the nearest approaching tank, while those on the hills opened up on the lead tank. After a volley of [RPG](#) fire, each of the three initially targeted vehicles was now immobilized.

Inevitably, all the remaining tanks came to an abrupt halt. As planned by the attackers, the position of the column severely limited options for a lateral breakout. The tank commanders were left with no choice but to fight from within the column or hope that the helicopter gunships, which were extremely well armed, could strike back effectively.

The gunship response was not long in coming. Having witnessed the unfolding offensive against their charges below and ahead, the Hind pilot at the rear of the flight radioed to his remaining fellow pilots to locate the source of enemy fire and eliminate it. He himself would focus on defending the head

end of the column to take out those [mujahideen](#) that could most readily create a logjam of tanks, but he would circle the hills to approach them from the rear. The helicopters broke formation.

As the lead gunship came within range, Abdul Latif's troops from near the peak of the northern hill let loose their self-destruct-enabled [RPGs](#). Of the six fired, his created the hoped for airburst and promptly set the lead helicopter on fire. In about ten seconds it careened out of control heading for the ground not far from the tank column. This left a pair of helicopters flanking left and right sides of the paralyzed column while the one originally guarding the rear raced to the far side of the north hill to approach the hills from the east.

The pilots of the other two gunships meanwhile located both the source of [RPGs](#) coming at them from the north hill, and the gunners that had been attacking the lead tank from halfway up the south hill. As one of the two Hinds turned left to focus on the air defense [mujahideen](#), the other veered to its right, toward the source of the anti-tank [RPG](#) fire.

Obedying Abdul Latif's initial orders, none of his air defense fighters high on the southern hill had fired and their presence remained unknown to the helicopter pilots. Having anticipated retaliation for his first attack, Abdul Latif hurried his fellow air defense fighters on the north hill toward a different spot while he signaled his men on the south hill finally to open fire. As the helicopter that had committed itself to counter-attacking Abdul Latif and his men turned to its left, the requested salvo of [RPGs](#) came from the south hill toward each helicopter. Realizing now that they were in a killing zone, both pilots hastily made evasive maneuvers, though the pilot who had begun to swing for the north hill managed to fire off three rockets first.

The first rocket was equipped with flechette warheads that burst just before impact, releasing small steel darts with tailfins. The head of a flechette was designed to bend on penetrating the target and the finned tail would break off producing a second debilitating injury. The second warhead was also flechette-equipped, inflicting injuries on two of Abdul Latif's men. The third warhead was conventional. It exploded upon impacting a rock outcrop on the hillside near the tail end of Abdul Latif's relocating troop. One of his fighters was torn to pieces. Another was killed when a flying rock struck his head. A third [mujahid](#) appeared to have taken a small stone close to his right eye, and struggled to function with blood streaming down his face.

Abdul Latif now had two dead and three injured on the north hill, and just three able-bodied fighters remaining, two of them still on rearguard duty looking out for helicopters approaching from the east.

Moments later, an airburst exploded close to the gunship that had launched the rocket attack. It was quickly engulfed in flames before exploding as onboard munitions ignited. One of the [RPGs](#) from the south hill's air defense group had been effective.

While the assault against the helicopters unfolded, the men that had attacked the trailing tank at the outset of the battle used its wreckage as cover to fire on the next one along in the column, now with no air cover. They began making progress toward the middle of the column. Likewise at the head of the column, the fighters lower down the hills remained focused on their tank targets and had already begun to leave each hill to pick off tanks deeper into the column.

The sole helicopter over the tank column sent rocket fire toward one of the anti-tank groups that had left the Mar Koh hills, when it, too, came under attack from the south hill air defense team. At that moment, the last remaining helicopter reappeared on the far eastern side of the north hill. Its pilot was preparing for a rearguard attack on the [mujahideen](#) troop that had been raining [RPGs](#) down on the tank column from the north hill. But he was neither prepared for the mayhem that had developed during their maneuver behind the hill, nor for the loss already of two of their flight's helicopters, with the third taking fire and succumbing in front of his eyes.

His gunner fired on the [mujahideen](#) on top of the south hill. However, having seen the fate of their colleagues on the north hill, the south hill's air defense [mujahideen](#) had already taken cover lower down the hill and were moving toward the men leading the tank attack. The rocket fire from the helicopter had no effect. The helicopter swung back to face the north hill and was about to pull in closer when a counterattacking volley of [RPG](#) fire from across the road caused a large airburst to its left. A piece of shrapnel tore through a rotor blade, weakening it. Parting from the rotor assembly, it flew off sideways and struck yet another blade, halving its length. The helicopter shuddered violently and rendered uncontrollable, it plunged earthward to explode on impact.

Free at last from the need to worry about helicopter support, the air defense [mujahideen](#) could direct their [RPG](#) firepower to crisscross the road from their elevated locations in support of the successful anti-tank teams already tearing up the tank column. T-62s were not only vulnerable from the rear; their armor was ill-equipped to sustain attacks from higher elevations. Before long, Abdul Latif and all the anti-tank squads were with their colleagues on the ground.

The outcome of this skirmish no longer in doubt, figures began emerging from the tanks driven by a well-placed fear of explosions from poorly protected onboard munitions. Arms in the air and shouting their surrender in [Pashto](#), they hurried east toward Haqqani's men, where Sikander also stood. *They're not Soviets*, mullied Sikander.

Soon, twenty of them were seated cross-legged with hands on their heads in two rows on the ground, waiting to learn their fate.

All told, the attack resulted in twenty of the twenty-four tanks being disabled and all but four of their crewmembers dead. The remaining four tanks were intact. Their sixteen crewmembers rounded out the total prisoner count. The undamaged tanks were in fair shape and would be taken as spoils. With so many of the [DRA](#) defecting over the years, the [mujahideen](#) had a comfortable familiarity with operating Russian tanks.

None of the helicopter crews survived.

It didn't take long for Jalaluddin to arrive from his observation post. Addressing the prisoners, he decided on a conciliatory approach.

"My brothers, fortune has not been kind to you that you have chosen the path of attacking your fellow Muslims. We know that many of you have been forced to do this by circumstance. Surrender yourselves to our cause and we will safeguard you and your families, and together we'll rid this country of ours of the godless communist enemy. Ultimately [inshaAllah](#) they will suffer a great loss; a loss of face and a loss of power. And as they will surely leave in humiliation, think then. What will become of you?"

Jalaluddin had few illusions, as did the prisoners. If they didn't join the [mujahideen](#), they were vermin, worthy of annihilation. If they did defect, they would go through intense processing to be sure that they were genuinely deserting the [DRA](#). The [mujahideen](#) had even established special groups of defection handlers who prepared such recruits to join the cause. They had seen great success in past skirmishes with the performance and dedication of defectors, who brought with them an understanding of enemy tactics as well as much-needed weapons and skills. Jalaluddin's speech was followed by silence.

After several seconds from somewhere among the [DRA](#) soldiers emerged the solitary cry: "[Allahu Akbar!](#)" A couple of seconds later came another, then another, until in rousing cacophony everyone declared their new allegiance. Welcoming the defectors into the [mujahideen](#) fold, Jalaluddin ordered six men to round up any small arms they could find and march the prisoners to Anarbagh.

With the prisoners taken care of, Jalaluddin regrouped with Abdul Latif and the rest of his fighters to review their losses. Abdul Latif conveyed the sad news of the two air defense fighters that had been killed and of the probable loss of Omar's eye. The rest were manageable injuries. Jalaluddin

listened with dismay but as far as he was concerned, such was the nature of war. He ordered two [mujahideen](#) per tank to join each of four tank drivers from the defecting troops to maneuver the captured T-62s out of the column, pushing aside the dead hulks of the burnt out vehicles. They were to accompany him to Khost where they would be put to good use.

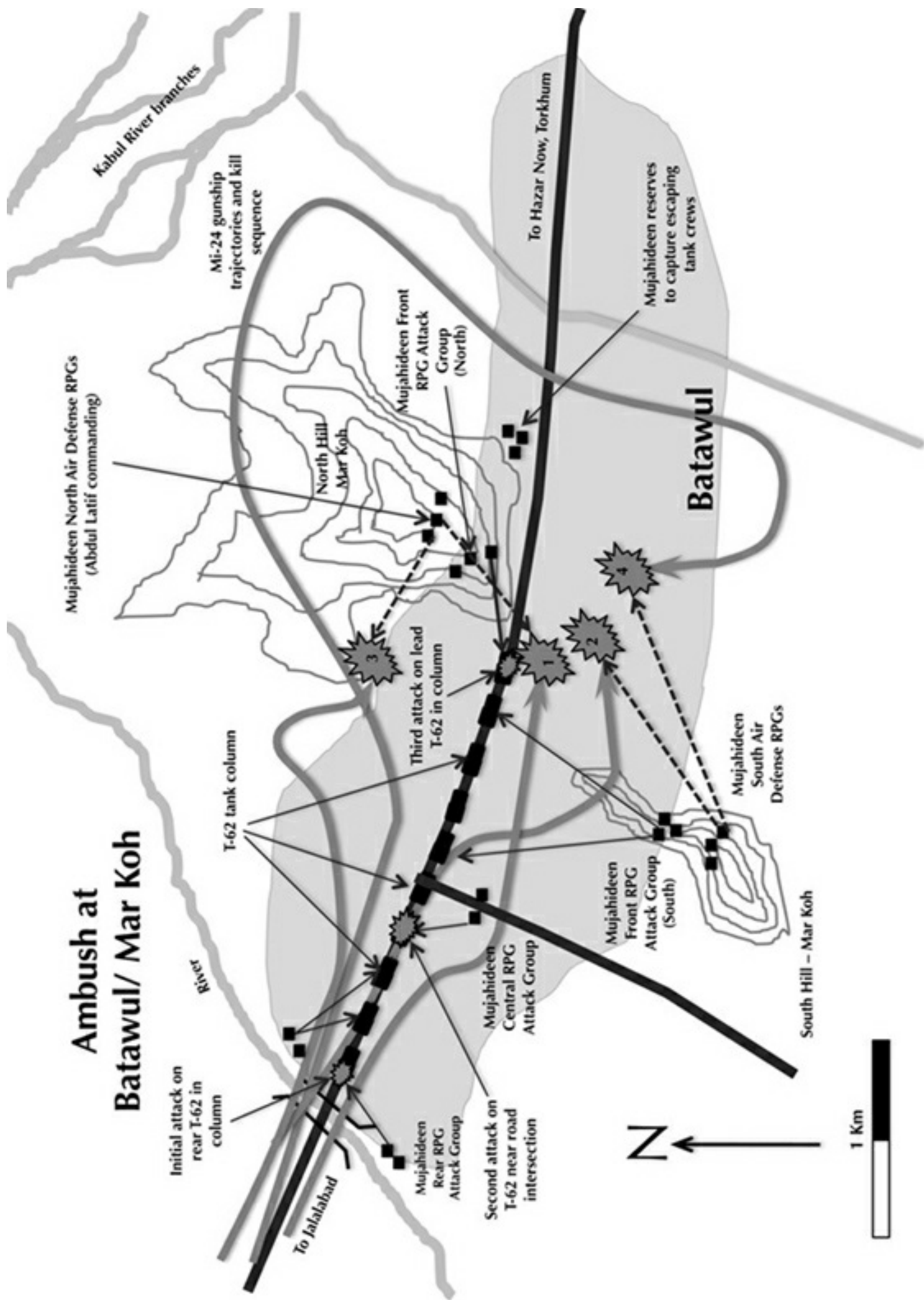
The [mujahideen](#) disbanded along village lines and Abdul Latif gathered his men to head back to Laghar Juy. Hastening from [Tora Bora](#), Abdul Rahman had not had time to join the skirmish and met with his fellow [mujahideen](#) just south of Anarbagh on their way home.

Abdul Latif judged it unlikely that retaliation would occur until at least a few days had passed and it would probably arrive in the form of airborne attacks on one or more of the villages in the area. Sustained evacuation of the villagers was therefore important and would have to remain in place for a few days until things settled down.

“Do you have the village families secure?” Abdul Latif asked.

“They’re safely in the caves,” replied Abdul Rahman. “We should all go up there until any attacks on the villages have passed.”

Ambush at Batawul/ Mar Koh



It took only two days for their informant network to reveal to the [DRA](#) that most of the fighters involved in the ambush had come from the area south of the highway and west of Anarbagh. On September 5, along with attacks on other locations in the area, two waves of Hinds and Mi-8 Hips came rolling into the valley of Laghar Juy. Despite Gatling gunfire and rockets launched into the village's rudimentary buildings, their real mission was to be performed by bombs. Each helicopter carried ten 100-kilogram bombs and each pilot dropped his deadly payload over his designated part of the fields around Laghar Juy and its adjacent villages. Experience had taught them that this would inflict the most enduring damage.

From their hideaway more than twenty kilometers away up the mountainside everyone could see in the distance the Hinds proceed with impunity to tear up their villages. Most people had seen this kind of attack on their homes and fields more than once before. There was little bemoaning of the event. When the dust settled and the last of the helicopters had disappeared toward Jalalabad, the [mujahideen](#) came out of the caves, many riding on mules, to lead their women and children, livestock, and packed mules back into the villages.

Four hours later, the villagers were in the upper reaches of Laghar Juy and were able to see the damage firsthand. Given the large craters and the absence of small ones, all of the bombs appeared to have exploded, which although a curse considering the damage wrought, was also a blessing. No one would be exposed to an unexploded device.

Many of their homes were affected, but since the focus of the attack had been on the fields on this occasion, a number of dwellings remained virtually unscathed. Noor's was one of them. Razya's was flattened.

Razya gasped, not from the shock of seeing the destruction—few things could evoke such a reaction these days—but from trying to imagine where they would live.

“What will we do?” Sikander asked, turning to his [AK-47](#) tutor.

Abdul Majeed exchanged glances with Ejaz and leaned into Sikander. “Aunt Noor's household will have to get larger for a while,” he remarked.

Just then, Abdul Latif, leading Razya atop her mule, approached Noor and Rabia, both of whom were still on theirs.

“We'll have to move in with you, sister,” he explained, adding nothing to Noor's knowledge. “It will be only so long as we have to build our own replacement home. Of course, we'll begin that immediately,” he added, hoping to soften the blow.

Noor was not happy about the prospect of three additional young men milling around in her home with her sixteen-year-old daughter. She understood, however, what the priorities were and nodded in resigned acquiescence. This was a time of war. For half of Rabia's life it had been that way and it called for exceptions to cultural norms. But Noor was determined not to allow exceptions to become new norms.

Although Razya had shown only a hint of emotion upon discovering the rubble that used to be her dwelling, it was impossible for her nesting instinct to be immune to all sense of setback. Being the ever-optimistic Razya, however, she was quick to put a positive spin on things. “Noor, since we have to be together, we can at least work on preparing for Ejaz's wedding, right?”

Wedding! Noor couldn't hold back a tearful chuckle as she considered such a notion amid the rubble all around her.

Having raised the issue of moving in for a while, Abdul Latif stood with his rifle perched over his shoulder like a yoke, resting both hands on it. He had nothing of consequence to add to the discussion of weddings and accommodations. As far as he was concerned, the important facts had been communicated and that was that.

While he was standing, Tahir, one of the village [jirga](#) members, hurriedly approached him.

“The fields! Destroyed! Almost completely,” exclaimed Tahir, gasping for breath.

“And the grain store?” Abdul Latif was unsurprised but disappointed.

“About two thirds of that too,” Tahir replied, heaving with despair. “We don't have enough for a complete replanting even if we do manage to level the fields and fill in the craters.”

Looking around and watching the expressions on his friends' faces, Sikander could see how out of step he was in interpreting the severity of this news. In the short time he had spent with them, his Afghan friends had always demonstrated a forbearing nature. Almost no hardship seemed great enough to cause mental collapse or the wringing of hands, despite them having seen more adversity than most in the world would see in a lifetime. Sikander leaned discreetly into Ejaz. “What does it mean?” he asked in a low voice.

Leaning into Sikander but without turning, Ejaz muttered: “It means we have to find more wheat from somewhere soon or face starvation during the winter and that might mean we have to go back to Pakistan to get it.” Turning to face Sikander he completed the comment. “But we also have to build your home and get the fields readied quickly or else the autumn planting will be missed. It won't be a quiet period.”

Abdul Rahman, having heard the last part of Ejaz's response, added the obvious additional consequence. “It also means the enemy's forced us to focus on these things, denying us the ability to organize any new attacks on them. That'll allow *them* to build up forces and attack us again,” he sighed.

Rapid repair of the fields was essential if wheat was to be planted, assuming that enough grain could even be spared. Failing that, they would have to increase the space allocated to poppy and use the cash from that to buy wheat. Poppy planting could be delayed until after necessary field repairs, up to late October or even early November. However, none of this would supplant the grain reserves lost in the attack.

Abdul Latif was the youngest member of the village [jirga](#). The [jirga's](#) involvement was clearly necessary on this occasion as virtually everyone was affected. Hurriedly, they met and a plan emerged that required the villagers to organize into three groups. As this was a matter of survival, everyone would have to make a contribution. The first group was to head up to the higher mountain villages of Takhto, Showlghar, Baro, and Chenar and persuade each of them to sell about a quarter to a third of their reserves to the Laghar Juy delegation. The second group was to repair the fields and ready them for planting. The third would be engaged in reconstruction. Meanwhile, any family that had lost its home would have to be housed by a family with an intact one until a replacement could be built, as had already been arranged within Abdul Latif's extended family.

Thankfully, the enemy had no capacity to shut off the main stream running through the village, providing irrigation as well as the water needed for making bricks, so a key commodity was still plentifully available. Sikander was assigned to the rebuilding group along with Saleem and several other young men. The women and girls were to help in forming and drying the bricks.

Abdul Latif's sons were assigned to field repair while he himself led the delegation to secure grain from the mountain villages. Ejaz accompanied him along with six other men. Gathering as many pack mules as they could, they set off for the hills within the day.

The following weeks were filled with toil. For Sikander and Saleem their first order of business was to cut a channel, about eighty meters long, from the village stream to a point close to Abdul Latif's home site. At that location, Noor and Rabia took the mud from the edge of the channel and mixed it with chopped straw or mule hair. The mixture was poured and tamped down into a simple wooden mold and left out in the sun. Once the mud started to dry,

the mold would be removed and the resulting brick left to dry out completely over several days. When the bricks were sufficiently hardened, it was down to Sikander and Saleem to put up the walls as close to their original position as possible.

Sikander spent considerable time with Razya, Saleem, Rabia, and Noor as the reconstruction progressed. Rabia was a quick-witted girl, a fact that had become increasingly apparent to Sikander given their new proximity to each other. Being at such close quarters however, also added to the risk of quarrels and Rabia often got into minor spats with Saleem. On such occasions, Sikander was too available to ignore when it came to adjudication. Rabia could always make a compelling case, but Sikander was especially taken by her seemingly effortless ability to cover the entire range from caustic to charming within a single argument.

Despite his role as judge in these matters, it wasn't uncommon for Sikander himself to be drawn into argument with Rabia, especially when his judgments were unfavorable to her. From time to time, sensing he was losing the argument, he would tease her with derisions delivered in Urdu or English while smirking at her momentary perplexion, an expression that was quickly dismissed by her certainty that she'd been insulted. She would glower, or wear a playfully evil smile while narrowing her eyes as her mind indulged in fantasies of retribution, sometimes turning them into plans.

On one occasion, after spending four hours in the sun molding bricks then lugging them in their damp, heavy state to add to a row waiting to dry, Rabia took a moment to rest.

Just then, Sikander came along with his crude barrow to bring a handful of dry ones back with him to the wall that he and Saleem were working on. In one of the drying rows he noticed a soggy, misshapen brick, which deteriorated even more when he picked it up.

"What's this, Rabia?" Sikander asked, impishly.

"I think you can see what it is, Sikander," she retorted.

"Hm...maybe I can get you to see it too!" Sikander picked away a lump of mud from the brick's corner and lobbed it at her. Rabia's left cheek and nose caught the bulk of the projectile.

"Sikander!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet. Wiping away the offending mud she gave the grinning Sikander a venomous glare. Running after him in her exhausted state would be futile. Guile, of which she had plenty, would have to be employed and she began immediately planning her [badal](#).

A few days later, Rabia decided to leave the straw and hair out of the brick-making mud and to place the seemingly dried bricks among the fully dried pile. None the wiser, Sikander and Saleem managed to build at least five courses of a wall and were standing back as they sometimes did to take a rest while admiring their work. Rabia, with a gleam in her eye, joined in, feigning her own admiration, when the weight of the wall initially caused an ominous bowing out of the freshly laid bricks, which was followed moments later by their total collapse into a pile of mud crumble.

The expressions were priceless: Horror, puzzlement, and dawning understanding flowed across the young men's faces in succession, assisted in the latter case by a now unrestrainable, smirking Rabia. Unable to contain herself any longer, she pulled out from behind her back a wad of straw, making sure they could see it as she burst out laughing before dashing away. They immediately gave chase.

Saleem was genuinely mad at her, at least briefly. He had been the "innocent" bystander on this occasion. Sikander, the true target, could see the humor, however, and once he was past the issue of the wasted effort, he had to laugh. In these somber times, such humor was itself of value, so he was inclined to let her go with a simple admonishment about the seriousness of the reconstruction effort. But first she had to be caught, which, although a foregone conclusion, was still no easy task.

When they finally did catch her, feeling none of Sikander's leniency, Saleem plucked her right ear, and gripping it with cautionary zeal, he marched her back home. Sikander discreetly remained in the background as Saleem presented his case to his mother and Razya. Noor admonished her daughter appropriately. Privately, she had to admit to being pleased that Rabia was taking on more of a personality and entertaining herself in customary, girlish manner. Rabia had spent several months coming to terms with the passing of her father and it was time for her true personality to blossom. Noor noted that Rabia would be about seventeen now. Though the precise date was uncertain, she knew that her daughter had been born after the planting season in 1969.

Rabia had studied at school until the end of July. She was one of the more accomplished students at the local village school and it was her father's wish that she become a doctor. With him now a [shaheed](#), she promised herself to strive to fulfill his wish. But the school had since been demolished by rocket fire and hadn't been reconstructed, given the difficulty in obtaining anyone to teach under such circumstances.

When she wasn't fighting or arguing with Sikander, Rabia would ask him about life in Pakistan, and school was often the subject.

Once, as the three of them were resting after several hours of construction work, Rabia began probing. "How did you come and go to school, Sikander?"

"We'd walk, usually."

"Hm...how many boys were there? How many in your class?"

"For the school? I'm not sure. Probably over four hundred. We'd be in classes of between fifteen and twenty and study all kinds of subjects."

"Was there a favorite?"

"I'd say English...geography, maybe." Sikander shrugged. "I like reading English books. Our English teacher had a lot of material on America." Sikander recalled his dreams of going to America; dreams whose realization now seemed more remote than ever.

About as interesting to Rabia as school was the way in which people got around in Pakistan. She knew about all the modern modes of transportation but had never experienced anything other than the mule and the horse, except for one brief ride with her late father in a captured old Russian vehicle. "What about cars?" she asked. "How do you feel traveling in them? Isn't it bumpy when you go so fast?"

Sikander patiently answered her questions, all the while increasing her appetite for more information until it was time to get back to work, finish the meal, or resume whatever else had been pressing at the time.

Rabia was sufficiently aware of the outside world to have more than a smattering of knowledge, but it was unique for a villager like her to have direct access to a person who had actually lived elsewhere. He would tell her about the kind of things he had learned, and enjoyed playing English teacher, translating for her the names of the everyday objects in their environment.

After almost three weeks, Abdul Latif and Ejaz returned from the hills. The glow on Ejaz's face betrayed the evident need to have traveled farther back into the mountains—clearly as far as Hinna's village. Indeed, Abdul Latif brought back with him a few simple gifts for Noor and her family, as well as confirmation of preferred dates for the wedding. Five days later, Abdul Latif's home was complete. It was built slightly larger than before on account of Sikander's presence, and the boys lost no opportunity to make other minor improvements that might ease their living.

Now well supplied with seed, their fields repaired, and their homes rebuilt, the people of Laghar Juy could continue with a semblance of normality. There was still less grain than required for planting, but enough for an average winter's flour-making. They would have to plant poppy. Allowing the repaired fields to go fallow for want of wheat grain would be a waste.

With the family in its new quarters, Sikander had more time on his hands, and though he pitched in like everyone else with the planting, he often took the time to stroll into the southern and higher elevations of the village and look away from it toward the distant mountains. He wondered what life might be like back in Hayatabad barely a month after he'd left his family. He was homesick.



Chapter 6

Applecross

BY THE END OF SEPTEMBER most of the homes in Laghar Juy had been repaired or rebuilt. The villagers were settling in for a normal winter. In the lower elevations the weather was usually mild, but higher up it could get harsh, especially during the prolonged period in the day when this close to the mountains, the sun was blocked by them. Abdul Latif imagined that once again, as in prior years, the fight with the Soviets and the [DRA](#) would wind down, as the weather would inhibit any adventurous initiatives by either side. He was wrong.

In the first week of October, Aamir and Yassir [Khan](#) were back with more weapons to be stockpiled for the offensives that would follow the break in the weather next spring. As before, having visited Yaqub [Khan](#), they brought word that all preparations were underway for a wedding in late February, a time that could usually be relied upon for good weather. With Noor having agreed to the date, a modest level of preparation became a fact of life in her household. Keenly interested in every aspect of her brother's soon-to-be big event, Rabia was eager to lay eyes on the girl who was destined to be her sister-in-law.

As was customary, Aamir and Yassir were afforded all the hospitality demanded by [melmasthia](#). They were put up in Abdul Latif's house and Sikander and Abdul Majeed were asked to bunk over at Noor's place for the few days the guests would be staying.

The following day, October 5, Noor invited Abdul Latif and his family to dine with hers and to bring the visitors with them. Everyone sat on the floor in the usual cross-legged style, and the meal was served on a cloth placed over the [durree](#) in her main room. While Rabia, Noor, and Razya served the meal, the men talked about the war and what might eventually transpire.

"Brother Abdul Latif, your role in devising the attack strategy on the tanks last month was reported by Jalaluddin to Yunus Khalis and stories of your courage and intelligence have spread around among the [mujahideen](#)," gushed Aamir.

Abdul Latif grinned modestly as he customarily declared "[Alhamdulillah](#)."

"Indeed," said Yassir, "the [RPG](#) technique has been noted, brother, and the men you trained have been training other men."

"I can't say I invented it, but I'd heard of it being used by Massoud's people up in the Panjshir area, though I hadn't seen it in action before I tried it myself. But if we're to get really serious, I know the Americans have started sending Stingers into Afghanistan, [alhamdulillah](#). I hope we start seeing them soon in Laghar Juy."

The two men exchanged knowing glances as Abdul Latif focused on forming a mouthful of rice and lentils in his hand. Sikander watched intently, and was intrigued by the level of understanding that seemed to cross the space between the visitors.

"We...uh...we've heard the same, about Stingers being used by Hekmatyar's men, and at the end of last month there was a spectacular success, which downed three shaytan-arbas in a single skirmish," noted Yassir.

"Really?" asked Abdul Latif. "So? What about us? What have you heard about *our* getting these weapons, Brother Yassir?"

"As far as we've heard, the Pakistanis have been trained in their use and are training Hekmatyar's men right now. In fact, some [ISI](#) people have been in America this past summer to be trained."

"[W>Allahi](#) we *have* to get our young men skilled in their use!" Abdul Latif declared impatiently. After dinner, the men arose and assisted by a pitcher of water poured by Rabia, washed their hands outside the house.

"It's a pleasant evening outside. Yassir and I are going for a stroll. Brother Abdul Latif, we'll go straight back to your place when we're done," Aamir said.

"Go ahead. We'll be along shortly." Abdul Latif replied.

Abdul Latif, his wife, and Abdul Rahman assisted Noor and her family to clean up, and as soon as they were done, left for home. Meanwhile, Sikander needed to go out to relieve himself after the meal, intending to return to Abdul Latif's when he was done. As he was leaving the latrine, he was about to turn in that direction when something he hadn't heard in quite a while, arrested his footsteps—English.

"...to make sure Haqqani's people also get the missiles and get trained."

"Yeah, we'll need to be bloody careful selecting the men. There's only going to be a few weapons initially and we don't have a lot of time. Do you think Abdul Latif will make a good trainee?"

"He might, but there'll be a god-awful problem in this area if we take him away for that long. He *has* to stay. He's the only one who can coordinate their defenses if the Russians come back too quickly."

The moon was new that night and had long since set, but with the dim flicker of lamplight leaking through from the window openings of a few nearby houses, Sikander could just make out Aamir and Yassir's silhouettes. Seeing the men was unnecessary, however. Sikander had already recognized their inadequately soft voices. He was stunned. As he stood transfixed, far from any lamplight, the men rounded the back corner of Noor's house, not far from the latrine. Sikander stepped into the dim light coming from the kitchen window to confront them but all he could think of was to mutter, "English," in surprised curiosity.

Yassir and Aamir exchanged glances, before locking eyes with Sikander. Until now they hadn't heard him speak English. He had never had the need except on isolated occasions, like teaching Rabia a few words; something they had never witnessed. Having always assumed from their brief interactions that Sikander was a local, they hadn't thought to consider his possible grasp of their native tongue.

But their cover had been compromised and there was no point in trying to hide the truth now—at least not all of it. "Sikander, I—I'm Andrew, and this is Simon. We're British military officers and we've been traveling between Afghanistan and Pakistan for the last several weeks. We've been supplying you [mujahideen](#) and we're here to help. But it's important that we don't get caught, so...we've adopted these disguises, and as you can tell, we're also trained to be fluent in [Pashto](#)."

Sikander sputtered in his own English, "I'm... I don't know what to say. I'm so surprised to see you speaking like [Pathans](#) and yet be—British soldiers? What will you do now?"

Simon responded: "We should probably discuss this with Abdul Latif, don't you think?"

Still shocked, Sikander nodded and motioned to the two men to walk on in front of him. Though he could hear them discussing what he was sure must have been their options, he couldn't be certain of the details. Still, having decided that there was probably no danger, he was pleased he'd be recognized for having exposed the two of them.

They arrived at Abdul Latif's house in short order. Abdul Latif greeted them into the main room but quizzed Sikander on why he was with them.

"Brother, er... Aamir and Yassir have something...something important to tell you," answered Sikander.

"Yes, yes all right," Abdul Latif replied as he called out to his wife. "Razya! Make three more [chais](#)." She called back her acknowledgement from the rear of the house. While his two sons sat on their [durree](#), with their backs against the wall, eyelids heavy after the meal, Abdul Latif unraveled his

turban to relax, stepping over to his newly replaced metal cabinet to put it away.

“Brother Abdul Latif,” started Aamir, “please sit down. We need to tell you something important.”

The earnestness in Aamir’s voice caught Abdul Latif’s attention and he scrutinized his guest quizzically before turning to the others as he sat down on the [durree](#). The two British officers began by explaining their true identities, or at least the names they were using. Puzzled, Abdul Latif looked at his two sons, then at Sikander, and back to the two men, as if fishing for someone in the room who could make sense of this.

When they were finished, Abdul Latif began, “Brother... Undrew?... Endrew? Can you prove your claims?” he asked with suspicion. “And if true, what is your mission with us?” Abdul Latif’s instincts were on full alert. The two men in front of him were suddenly strangers once more. He bristled with speculation.

“Brother, call me Andy, and no, we can’t absolutely *prove* who we are,” replied Andy. “But we can assure you that we wouldn’t be willing to share even this much if we intended any harm. You know that since we’re British, we’re on your side. And if we had been Russians, we wouldn’t have used English in secret, would we? Sikander surprised us when we thought we were alone...and, I must say, surprised us with his knowledge of our language!”

Abdul Latif pondered Andy’s words. “I’m inclined to believe you, Andy, but you couldn’t share the truth with your own host?”

Simon responded with an apology, “We *are* ashamed we had to deceive you, but it was necessary in the event any of us were captured. In that case you wouldn’t have been any the wiser, and that would have protected you. We’re here to find good people to train on the new Stinger missiles, the very things you were so passionate about at dinner tonight. As you know, president Zia’s only just agreed to accept them, but there isn’t sufficient training support in Pakistan and it can’t be done with acceptable secrecy. So, we’re looking for people to take to Europe for training.”

“But you’re English. Why didn’t the Americans come?” Abdul Latif queried, still unsettled.

Complete openness was the only option, now. “The CIA doesn’t want its operatives captured in Afghanistan and they don’t wish to be directly associated with Stinger deliveries to the [mujahideen](#),” Simon explained. “They’re not inclined to escalate the cold war into a hot one with the Soviets so, the British government has been asked to do it, which is why *we’re* here.”

The mists began to clear. Abdul Latif was a warrior seasoned by many years of hard experience to think ahead and read situations before they became fatal. His survival was a testament to this ability. Yet here he was, surprised on this occasion, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. *What if these men had been Russians?*

Nevertheless, Abdul Latif was sufficiently in command of himself to separate such insecurity from the facts being presented, and to evaluate them on their own merits in a way that didn’t let feelings make unwarranted inroads into judgment. At least that part of his survival instinct was still functioning. There was an uneasy silence as the men looked on, broken only by Razya coming through from the back room with tea.

Having completed her last chore, Razya bid the visitors [salaams](#) and went to bed. Convinced now that the visitors were there to help, Abdul Latif took a sip of his [chai](#) and motioned for Andy to continue

“Brother Abdul Latif,” said Andy, “we ask that you share part of this information with one of your nephews. We’ll need him to cooperate too.”

“How?”

“On our previous trips,” started Andy, who by now had made it apparent that he was the senior officer, “we’ve seen how these young men have handled themselves and we’re confident we can train them, but since Sikander can speak our language, we think he should join us. He’ll make an excellent interpreter with the other [mujahideen](#).”

Sikander all but levitated.

“We’d like to take Sikander with us but—” began Andy.

“But what?” Sikander interrupted, suddenly concerned.

“But we’re only able to take three trainees.”

Abdul Latif’s two sons and Sikander exchanged glances before turning to Andy. Abdul Latif was the one to ask.

“So which three do you have in mind?”

“Ejaz is getting married soon and we don’t want to interrupt anything there. Abdul Rahman, as the oldest you’re more ready for a leadership role when you return, so we think you should come, as should Saleem and Sikander. That’ll leave Ejaz to look after Noor and Rabia, with Abdul Majeed here to help you Brother Abdul Latif.”

“I see,” replied Abdul Latif, but the questions piled up in his mind. “How should Rabia, Ejaz and the two mothers be told of this? How long will you be gone? How will you take everyone?”

“All we can say is we’re going back to Pakistan for about a month,” explained Andrew. “You can say it’s another supply pickup but from beyond Peshawar this time,” he continued. “It’ll be the truth. Just not all of it.”

“A month? That’ll be it?” Abdul Latif asked.

“Yes,” replied Simon. “And as it’s Sunday today, we’ll need to leave the day after tomorrow, in the morning, if we’re to be at our pickup location in Pakistan by Thursday.” The immediacy of the mission caught everyone by surprise and Andy felt the need to elaborate.

“The original goal was to spend a month longer here. We’d have revealed our mission to you much later, after completing our assessment. Now, instead of training next month, we’d like to move things up and take the most immediate program, due to start next weekend. We’ll radio news of the change to our [ISI](#) friends once we reach Peshawar.”

Abdul Latif absorbed everything before pronouncing, “So be it.” He cleared his throat. “We’re, um, about to do [isha](#) now.” Abdul Latif could only feel awkward over the visitors’ earlier religious pretense. Andy and Simon went to bed leaving Abdul Latif, his two sons, and Sikander to pray.

Sikander walked back to Noor’s place, aglow with satisfaction at the evening’s developments, and with his role in precipitating them. The following morning, Abdul Latif made clear to Razya that Sikander and Abdul Rahman would be leaving for a month and be joined by Saleem. Though a little surprised, she put it down to a more complex mission than usual. Razya had learned not to read too much into missions. It would simply stoke her fears and besides, it was easier just to let the men go and return as needed.

Noor was altogether different, barraging Abdul Latif with her unending questions. Finally, Abdul Latif explained that Saleem’s mission was pivotal to the [mujahideen](#) cause—though specifics would only be revealed upon leaving Peshawar—and that she should bless them all for it. Reluctantly, she acquiesced.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the trip. Five mules were rigged for riding, which would enable them to move with the necessary speed to remain on schedule. As Rabia helped Sikander and her brother to pack, she envied them. Once again, they would see what lay beyond the village and the mountains. Simply imagining the adventure awakened her yearnings, which for now at least, would have to wait.

“[Aba'i](#) says you'll be gone for a month, Sikander,” she remarked.

“That's right, Rabia,” Saleem chimed in before Sikander could respond.

“Well, I just hope you both stay safe,” she continued. “[Aba'i](#) never finds it easy when you're away, Saleem.”

“We'll be fine. But we will miss you.” Sikander offered.

“Us? Or me?” She asked. “I wish I was—”

“Rabia, we're almost done here. Go and see if [Aba'i](#) needs any help,” Saleem interrupted as he walked off to pick up more clothing.

Pouting, Rabia retreated toward the house. As she approached the doorway, she cast a mischievous glance backward, and almost caught Sikander staring. But knowing her well enough by now, Sikander skillfully beat her to it, returning his attention to his own preparations before her glance could catch his eyes. He grinned as he continued packing.

The group set out on their mules the following morning for Chenar. Although Sikander had been homesick for Peshawar, having now seen hardships and victories with his newfound people, the nostalgia he felt for them, too, was palpable as Laghar Juy disappeared from sight.

With everyone riding instead of leading their mules, it didn't take long to cross the rugged mountains to the point where they had left the Pajero several weeks earlier. Sikander reflected on what he had done and how different he had become in those short weeks. He had received an education in every respect as meaningful as his schooling in Peshawar. The thought brought his family and school friends to mind as he longed to share his exotic experiences with them.

The Pajero awaited them outside the familiar staging house. Without delay, the travelers dismounted and after transferring their light cargo to the vehicle, drove on to Jamrud.

By early Wednesday evening, they were all safely at Arif Saiduddin's house, where they were to spend the night. As before, they were met by Junaid and Arif, neither of who knew “Aamir's” and “Yassir's” true identities. But they had been fully briefed on the transportation arrangements for the following day.

Arif, in his usually jovial fashion, saw Sikander and gave him a welcoming hug.

“Welcome back young...Is...Sikander!” he exclaimed, stumbling with Sikander's name. “Growing a beard? [MashAllah](#)! Why, you'll be looking like a proper [maulwi](#) next time we meet!”

Sikander patiently acknowledged the joke and looked across to Junaid. Junaid's barely perceptible nod and body language seemed to convey that Sikander's letter had indeed been delivered.

The men went into Arif's basement. “All right gentlemen,” began Arif. “Tomorrow morning you'll be leaving by road for Sargodha. Junaid [bhaj](#) will be taking you and explaining a little bit more en route, so you can all rest on the long drive. I have a home there on Fatima Jinnah Road, not far from the bus station. That's where you'll be staying the night, and from there you'll get more instructions.”

Sargodha. The Punjabi city was famous for many things, among them, its important Pakistan Air Force base. Sikander's exhilaration mounted.

With this simple briefing over, after [isha](#), the group retired for the night.

As soon as [fajr](#) was completed the following morning, Sikander approached Junaid. “Junaid [bhaj](#), did my note get to my family?”

Junaid nodded. “I took it personally as far as the street where you live and paid a young boy fifty rupees to drop it into your mailbox. Watching from the street corner, once I saw he let go of the letter, I was on my way. Would you like me to take another?”

Sikander smiled. “Yes, please.”

Junaid asked Arif for some paper and pulled out his ballpoint from his [gamees](#) pocket. Sikander hurriedly prepared a short letter for Junaid to examine. Seeing no issues, Junaid folded it into his shirt pocket, tucking in his pen after it.

“Thanks. Hope I can repay the favor one day.”

“You're already doing that, Sikander. We're proud of what you're doing in Afghanistan. Many parents in this country couldn't say that about their own sons.”

Sikander had always found the intelligent and well-organized Junaid to be a likeable fellow. His knowledge of Junaid was, of course, superficial. However, as he had lived among strangers for so many weeks and shared many hazardous and enjoyable experiences with them, Sikander had sharpened his already keen skills in observing people. For Junaid, he had felt a fraternal bond and the sense that this man would do anything to keep a promise—not a common quality in Sikander's experience.

Before they could depart, Junaid made one request of the visitors. “Brothers, the weapons stay here. They'll be safe, but we can't travel beyond this province very easily with them and there's really no need.”

Abdul Rahman, Saleem, and Sikander reluctantly set their [AK-47s](#) down against the wall behind them, and feeling highly under-dressed, took off their bandoliers. Sikander didn't lose the opportunity to pick up Saleem's knife and scratch an identifying squiggle on his weapon in readiness for his return.

Soon the travelers were packed and back inside the Pajero. Junaid drove. Abdul Rahman was beside him in the front passenger seat, while Sikander and Saleem took the next row. “Yassir” and “Aamir” were in the rear, along with some basic provisions for the journey ahead.

Proceeding out of Peshawar east toward Rawalpindi, the GT Road passed through a broad flat expanse, to the south of which were some mountains rising sharply from the intervening plain. Seated on the right, Sikander was well placed to view the mountains about ten kilometers away. The scene triggered not only memories of his journey into Afghanistan, but also thoughts of the essential mystery of mountains to which that journey had exposed him. They were the walls of nature, making it difficult to reach out and touch a neighbor or to see the strange ways that people, cultures, and life in general had evolved on the other side, beyond the wall.

Sikander's wandering gaze landed on Saleem. Though not a very talkative individual, Saleem was clearly fascinated by the beautiful backdrop, having only ever been as far as Peshawar. Seeing him made Sikander feel a sense of pride about his own country. The feeling surfaced in an expression that Saleem was quick to recognize.

He doesn't know who Aamir and Yassir really are. He hasn't a clue about what's being asked of him. He only knows he's on another mission, Sikander reflected. Saleem's courage was manifest. Sikander's thoughts drifted to the future and what they would be encountering in the larger world beyond Pakistan. With the imposition of secrecy, he and Abdul Rahman would have to act as surprised as Saleem would no doubt be when the appropriate moment came. But that was some way off.

The GT Road continued out of Peshawar and on to Attock, where it veered to a southerly track, running roughly parallel to the Kabul River. The city, formerly called Campbellpur by the British, was where the ravenous Indus River, coming out of the northeast of the country, drank the Kabul in an incessant gulp. Over the river, the road bridge turned them sharply to the east again as it passed the base of the imposing overlook of Attock Fort.

Several large-caliber pockmarks in the fort's massive wall recalled skirmishes long forgotten and the challenging nature of the fort's former mission for the British.

As they headed into Rawalpindi, they stopped at an eating-place, and in the fine autumn weather, with the beautiful plain and mountains in the distance, Sikander's pride could no longer be contained. He quizzed Saleem on the latter's thoughts about his native land.

"Don't you agree that this is a beautiful country, Saleem?" he asked. Saleem's eyes betrayed the obvious wonderment of absorbing an inspiring scene for the very first time.

"I do, though you must agree, Afghanistan is also beautiful, yes?"

Abdul Rahman emitted a muted chuckle.

"Yes. Yes it is, Saleem," acknowledged Sikander patiently. "But what do you think are the differences?"

"Well, I think the people look different, a little darker perhaps than anyone in our group. I think this food is different, perhaps more flavorful," he noted, in a reluctantly deferential nod toward Pakistani cuisine. "I like the easy roads, which allow us to move much more quickly than in Afghanistan. Shall I continue?"

"No!" laughed Sikander.

After [zuhr](#) and a brief phone call by Junaid, they were on their way again. Once out of Rawalpindi, they followed the GT Road southeast. When they passed Wazirabad, after stopping for [asr](#) at a small roadside mosque, they left the GT Road for Pindi Bhattian on a much smaller road. From Pindi Bhattian, proceeding northwest, they made Sargodha by nightfall.

Once the car was parked at Arif's house, Junaid got out.

"I'm going to stay the night with a cousin. I called him on our way here. I'll be back in the morning to pick up the car but it will be after you'll have gone, so [fi-amanillah](#), good luck, and I'll see you all in about a month."

Junaid hailed a taxi, hugged his friends, shook hands, and was gone.

The following morning, the five travelers awoke, completed [fajr](#) and made ready for the day ahead. After an early breakfast, provided them by Fuad, Arif's servant and house sitter, Simon paused from his tea, arose to confirm that all the doorways to the room were closed, and gave the nod to Andy to proceed.

"Brothers, we must now brief you fully on this mission," Andy began. "We're British soldiers with the Special Air Service. We've been in Afghanistan to gather [mujahideen](#) such as you for training on the Stinger missile. The Stinger will make a huge difference to your ability to defend against airborne attacks. We can't tell you our real names but you can call me Andrew, or Andy, and this is Simon."

His mouth agape, Saleem swiveled to face Sikander, who feigned surprise as best he could. His eyes darted to Abdul Rahman's, who was wearing his look rather better than Sikander. Saleem's heart raced and the slightest hint of Sikander's less concerned demeanor led him to ask, "Did you know this?"

Sikander frowned, questioning the question and gave a tiny, but vigorous headshake at such a preposterous notion.

Andy continued. "We had met the three of you and your brothers before, but when we heard of your fighting last month, we knew you'd make excellent trainees. You're brave and intelligent. You'll be able to teach your brothers and friends when you return equipped with the missiles, and when you do, the Russian helicopters won't have an answer. Your enemies are our enemies too."

"Where will we be trained?" Sikander asked.

"We've gathered together fifteen of you and six of us to go to the PAF base here in Sargodha. We're keeping the groups small until we can scale up the program effectively. This is the second group to be trained. This morning, a PAF C130 Hercules will fly us to Doha in Qatar, and from there an RAF C130 will take us to Rome, where we'll refuel and go on to Scotland—we can't say where—for the training."

Any pretense of surprise on Sikander's part at the earlier revelation gave way to something more genuine. With this glimpse of the scale of the assistance being given to the [mujahideen](#), he felt the pride of being among a select few.

"Brothers," Sikander urged Saleem and Abdul Rahman, "we've been chosen [alhamdulillah](#)! Shouldn't we be pleased to return with the weapons and skills we're supposed to be acquiring? We'll get a chance to make a difference and just think! We could become celebrated heroes of this [jihad](#), like your father, Saleem."

Saleem's initial shock melted away as he landed on a similar conclusion to Sikander's. Intrigued and excited, he would give everything to do this job well. Abdul Rahman grinned and nodded in agreement.

Feeling prideful, Sikander turned to ask Andy, in English, "When do we leave?"

"Ten minutes," came the short and deflating [Pashto](#) reply.

With Simon at the wheel, the group drove the short distance to Sargodha airport. Simon handed the Pajero's keys to a uniformed PAF officer who seemed to be expecting the travelers. They entered one of the small buildings adjoining a hangar. Against the far wall were several lockers. Andy and Simon opened one and took out a couple of large rucksacks, removed what looked like clothes from them, and stepped into the bathroom next to the lockers. Minutes later, they returned wearing British Army uniforms.

"Let's go!" Andy called out. He led them through the door at the far end of the room, which opened out onto one of the many aprons of the airfield. Sikander saw the other [mujahideen](#) together with their escorts, and as they converged on the aircraft that was to take them to Qatar, he experienced a growing sense of purpose. At that moment, all feelings of homesickness lay buried under the weight of anticipation of the mission ahead.

The Hercules C130 of the PAF's Six Squadron, based at Chaklala near Rawalpindi, waited on the airfield apron, ready to roll. The rampant antelope insignia at the front of the aircraft gave away its pedigree. It belonged to Pakistan's oldest air squadron and the only one used for tactical air transport operations such as the one being undertaken that day. Having landed barely an hour earlier, now, at almost nine in the morning, it was fully fueled and awaited its human cargo.

The group climbed the loading ramp into the back of the aircraft's cavernous cargo bay. Neither Abdul Rahman nor Saleem had ever flown. Despite their typically casual [Pathan](#) attitude toward most life-threatening experiences, they felt sufficiently lacking control of this one to exhibit nervousness, though with no shortage of excitement.

Sikander had already traveled with his father by air, but this plane's interior was completely different from a commercial airliner's. Presently, however, he felt an undeniable sense of pleasure at his advantage over his companions. They had routinely had the upper hand in Afghanistan, their home turf, and now it was his turn. This time, *he* had been around and seen or done things with which they might be unfamiliar. Perhaps they could learn a thing or two from him.

Once the [mujahideen](#) were seated and strapped in on the metal benches lining the walls of the cargo hold, the massive ramp door was closed and the

lights in the rear were turned on. The airframe juddered as the engines began to wind up; as they finally spun into self-sustaining action, the noise became a ninety-seven decibel roar. The British officers sitting nearest the cockpit of the aircraft withdrew ear-protecting muffs from a bin and passed them out.

Sikander and Saleem were seated next to each other on either side of a window. Neither was able to resist the temptation to swing around somewhat awkwardly on his perch and observe the scene outside. Abdul Rahman was on the opposite side of the airplane facing them. The prospect of being suspended in the sky inside a large metallic object made him reluctant to peer outside.

The aircraft taxied to runway 14, Sargodha's longest. After completing a few final checklist items, Squadron Leader Omar Amin pushed the combination throttle forward. A brief lurching jolt was quickly followed by the aircraft gathering speed as it rolled smoothly down the runway.

As the C130 climbed rapidly, Sargodha retreated beneath them. Eventually, however, the haze over the city left little to see. Maintaining heading, the aircraft climbed to over six thousand meters before making a large sweeping turn to the south and then the southwest as it established cruise heading toward Qatar on a course that would keep it well to the south of Afghanistan's airspace.

The aircraft landed in Doha just before noon local time. When the engines finally shut down, everyone removed their ear defenders and the big ramp door was lowered. A sudden rush of heat and the blinding noonday light burst into the comparatively dark cargo bay. By the time the door had completely opened, they could see that three-dozen Qatari soldiers had flanked each side of a path all the way from the ramp door to the building that the disembarking [mujahideen](#) were to enter. Two British Army officers stepped forward to greet the travelers.

They were ushered quickly into the small building. Andy and Simon offered their three charges drinks and light refreshments. Out of courtesy they stuck to their [Pashto](#). Everyone took advantage of the food and drink as the flight had dehydrated them. They also took bathroom breaks and made their prayers in a chapel off to one side of the main hall. It was a very well appointed room, probably some kind of VIP lounge, Sikander observed, and from the way Saleem's and Abdul Rahman's heads were swiveling, he guessed the same thought was crossing their minds.

After an hour and a half of resting, strolling around the room, or picking up the occasional magazine—which Sikander could see offended the sensibilities of some of his fellow [mujahideen](#) with their pictures of uncovered female faces and tight clothing—the men were led out of the building, past the lineup of Qatari soldiers, and into the cargo hold of what seemed to be the same aircraft but was in fact a type C-3 Hercules from RAF Lyneham's Forty-Seven Squadron. It was in better shape than the PAF aircraft. Everyone took the same seating arrangements as before.

The familiar rumbling of the engines began once more, and after taxiing out to runway 16, they were airborne again. Rising into the sky, the aircraft entered a steep climbing turn to the right to establish a northwesterly course over the Arabian Peninsula in the direction of Alexandria, Egypt. About four hours later, they were passing over the grand, sweeping arc of Alexandria's bay. Shortly afterward, the airplane turned onto a more northerly track, making the Mediterranean crossing directly toward Italy and a landing in Rome.

Rome was mythical. Sikander had read so much about it and but for the arcane language, had thought himself fortunate to study *Julius Caesar*. His curiosity trumped his weariness as he strained to see parts of the city's old, majestic face, especially the Colosseum, present itself through patchy cloud cover.

Six hours out of Qatar, at five in the afternoon local time, the [mujahideen](#) passengers were led off the aircraft to wait in a lounge one last time. With sunset came the [maghrib](#) prayer, with one of the older [mujahideen](#) leading the congregation. Their traveler status meant they could combine the [maghrib](#) and [isha](#) prayers in [qasr](#). After a light meal, appropriately respectful of a Muslim diet, by six-thirty they were back in the air headed toward Scotland.

Broadford was a small airfield on the Isle of Skye. The C130 demonstrated its ample skills as it came to a halt on the short, narrow runway, approaching the airfield's solitary building before the pilot finally cut the engines. It was nine-thirty at night as the fresh, cool air brushed against the travelers' faces when the cargo door opened. To Sikander, it felt very similar to a cool night in Laghar Juy, though lacking its familiar livestock smells.

Tired and sleepy, the [mujahideen](#) were ushered out of the Hercules and marched over to a nearby HC2 Chinook helicopter of the RAF's Eighteen Squadron. Another ten short minutes and they were descending onto a helipad at the SAS training facility at Applecross, whose existence was little known to most people, and not at all to the [mujahideen](#).

Everyone stepped out of the boarding ramp onto a windy tarmac surface, from where they were directed to a large cabin a short walk from the helicopter. Well lit, warm, and of metal construction, it had bunks along its windowed walls. Perpendicular to the walls, each double bunk with its headboards against the cabin wall, stood between each pair of windows.

The weary travelers shed their shoes and dropped onto whatever bed was nearest. Sikander and Saleem stayed together. Saleem took the lower bunk and Sikander climbed to the top. He was exhausted. It was three in the morning in Pakistan. Abdul Rahman, having grabbed the bunk to their left, had already drifted off. Above him was an older [mujahid](#), a fellow by the name of Hamza Ali, who had led the prayers in Rome.

None of the visitors slept for long. By three in the morning, Sikander and many of the others arose, wondering what to do next. The SAS training compound was secure, so their hosts felt that locking them up in the cabin was unnecessary. It would also give the men a sense of greater freedom to wander outdoors. The local terrain was a reasonable proxy for their own home country and would provide an ideal environment in which to learn Stinger operations. Some of the men did venture outside in the predawn darkness, but remained close to the cabin while taking in the fresh, sweet, Scottish air.

The first hint of daylight cast a dim, pink glow through the small window in the door at the end of the cabin. It was easily visible with all the cabin lights turned out. Comparing it with the relative darkness of the remaining cabin windows, Sikander noted that this must be the southeast source of the autumn morning sun, which in Scotland, also meant it was in the direction of the [Qiblah](#). He went to one of the bathrooms at the far end of the cabin and waited in line to perform the [wudhu](#). When he was done he came out and joined the others who laid out their blankets on the floor to perform the dawn prayer. Others had either already done so and were back asleep, or had simply failed to rise for the prayer.

As the morning established itself, sleep was out of the question. The airplane ride had been too noisy to allow any chatter and they had been too tired to try. Now was the best time to make good on the lost opportunity. One of the two young men on Sikander's right, a twenty-year-old, sat on the edge of the lower bunk facing Sikander and Saleem while above him was a younger boy of eighteen.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum!](#) I'm Irfan," offered the [mujahid](#) on the lower bunk. Sikander and Saleem reciprocated the greeting and introduced themselves. "We're from the Khost area," explained Irfan, rolling his eyes up toward his companion. "He's my brother, Usman."

"Waziri?" asked Saleem, seeking instinctively to understand tribal origin.

Irfan shook his head in smiling denial. "Ghilzai [Pashtun](#)."

Saleem acknowledged politely as Abdul Rahman came over to join them.

The five of them engaged in small talk until, at around nine-thirty, the SAS officers arrived, banging on the cabin's walls. The cabin's largely metallic structure made this action effective in getting the few remaining sound sleepers to stir. Those who had returned to sleep after [fajr](#) arose for the

second time that morning and were soon piling into the bathrooms to prepare themselves for the day. Like most of the others, Sikander was wide-awake from being on Pakistan time.

Before long, Simon entered the cabin. Sikander walked eagerly toward him. “Simon! Good morning! So, what’s happening now?”

Simon politely asked him to return to his bunk, saying instructions would come later. Meanwhile he and four fellow junior officers had brought in several boxes. They opened them and pulled out polythene bags containing fresh beige [gameeses](#) and [shalwars](#) with quilted green body warmers, fresh underwear, and black woolen socks. From other boxes the officers retrieved black boots and laid them out on the floor.

“Her Majesty’s government is pleased to welcome you all,” Simon pronounced in clear [Pashto](#). “These new clothes are a gift from the British people. Please take them and put them on.”

Given what he was wearing Sikander found no difficulty complying with the request. He sprang forward, avidly selecting items that would fit. Everyone else followed. Despite their new clothes being in regular Afghan style, the troop took on the appearance of uniformed soldiers.

With attire out of the way, Simon directed them to an adjacent cabin where a modest breakfast buffet had been laid out.

“Simon, where’s Andy?” Sikander asked.

“I can’t say. He’ll join us later though.”

As breakfast was wrapping up, another officer, a little older than Simon, walked into the cabin. Simon called out to the group to pay attention as the officer made his announcement in English while Simon translated.

“Welcome, [mujahideen](#)! Today, we’re going to begin a four-week intensive program to teach you to use the Stinger missile effectively. I’m Captain James Laing, and I’ll be in charge of your training.”

Before Simon could complete his translation, Sikander had already whispered it to Saleem. Captain Laing explained that each day everyone would need to be awake by dawn so that a full day’s training could be completed.

“There’s a lot to learn about using the Stinger effectively,” Laing declared. “It might be an easy weapon to fire, but it isn’t easy to fire successfully without training.”

Laing also laid out the camp rules. There was to be no travel outside the camp perimeter as the entire operation was secret. They were free to exercise and play games or worship as they wished. Materials for reading and writing would be provided, and all food was strictly [halal](#), being supplied from Glasgow where there had been, as Laing patiently explained, a thriving Pakistani community for the past three decades. Several other minor rules were clarified, as was the reason for not asking the visitors to wear Western clothing. They were to be trained in whatever attire would normally be worn while using the Stinger in Afghanistan. If this policy exposed any issues with clothing, the training would be a good way to discover them. Captain Laing wrapped up his short introduction and everyone was encouraged to relax in the bunk cabin, continue to introduce themselves to each other, and take a walk around the campground, but in time to be back for lunch at noon.

Following lunch, the men were led into a hangar-like building that had been set up with classroom seating. At one end was a raised platform with a podium, behind which was a large white screen.

Captain Laing walked in with Simon by his side. “Please be seated everyone,” he said. Simon translated. The lights were dimmed, the drapes drawn, and a 35mm slide projector was turned on as Laing opened the proceedings.

“The Soviet Fortieth Army has occupied Afghanistan since December 1979,” he began. “In that time, they’ve supplied the puppet government in Afghanistan with deadly helicopters in the form of the Mi-24 Hind and the Mi-8 Hip, which you all are quite familiar with, unfortunately. They have indiscriminately attacked *your* villages, *your* fields, *your* crops, and *your* livestock and innocent women and children have been killed or badly wounded.

“We’re about to train you to use a weapon to defend against such shameless attacks. Sometimes you will hear the word *MANPADS*. In English, this stands for the Man-Portable Air Defense System and refers to several small but deadly types of anti-aircraft missile. The latest of these is the FIM-92A Stinger.”

On the screen behind him, Laing’s comments were supported by simple but powerful images of the notorious helicopters and the horrific results they had wrought. He also showed a picture of the Stinger system being held over an operator’s shoulder, illustrating its use. Pausing for each of Simon’s translations, Laing remained watchful to be sure that his audience was following him.

“[Mujahideen](#), you’ve been selected for this important training because of your courage and intelligence. These qualities will be critical to your success, both in training and when you have to use this weapon. Our objective is to turn you into deadly users of the Stinger missile by the end of this program. If we can help you succeed, there’s a good chance your country will be rid of the Soviets and a great victory will have been achieved...[inshaAllah](#).” Laing didn’t understand [Pashto](#) or Arabic, but he knew enough to utter the Muslim invocation of the will of God.

The audience perked up when they heard the familiar word. Before Simon could begin translating, one of them called out “[Takbeer!](#)” to which the rest responded in a loud chorus “[Allahu Akbar!](#)” After the hubbub settled, Simon delivered Laing’s comments.

Laing continued. “We’re passing out books that contain the lessons we’re going to cover.”

Two soldiers picked up a large pile of ring binders in which the training course, a 194-page tome entitled: *Introduction to Man Portable Air Defense Weapon System: Subcourse No. AD 0575, Edition A—US Army Air Defense Artillery School, Fort Bliss, Texas*, had been rendered in [Pashto](#).

“There are three main lessons and within each will be several learning activities. Each activity consists of a classroom portion and a practical portion in which we’ll ask you to use training versions of the full weapon. As you become more capable we will also ask you to fire at least one live missile at our firing range.

“The first lesson is an introduction to the overall system and will have the following learning activities.” Supported by illustrations, he proceeded to describe each activity.

“First, we’ll cover the capabilities of the system. Second, will be a detailed description of its different components. Third, will be familiarization with handling procedures, and fourth will be operation of the weapon. Each of these activities will have one or more exercises. The exercises are designed to make your knowledge complete and, in time, your use of the weapon fast and flawless. Please be sure to study these documents after we go through the lessons.” Laing paused, seeing several [mujahideen](#) flipping through the pages.

“Now, we know that some of you aren’t...um, able to read. This should not be a problem as we’re going to arrange you in groups of three, and we’ve made the selection so that at least one person in each group can read the material and explain it to the others. Does anyone have any questions?”

On the heels of Simon’s translation, the room fell silent. No [mujahid](#) was looking to embarrass himself. As Laing was about to continue, a voice called out from the audience, “Thank you, sir. How long do you expect this lesson and these four activities to take?”

Laing hadn’t been briefed on Sikander’s facility with English. He was surprised and pleased that this young man had stood up, unafraid to ask a

question and to do so in English. As the [Pashto](#) translation came through to the men, Laing scanned the room and could see that Sikander had for many of them become a source of pride against possible patronizing on the part of the instructors.

“That’s an excellent question, young man,” Laing responded with barely a hint of condescension. “If things go according to plan, we’ll take ten days to get you through lesson one.”

Again, Simon translated as Laing paused for another moment, not asking for more questions but leaving time for someone else to raise his hand or stand up. When no one did, he returned to his presentation.

“After the first lesson, we’ll proceed to lesson two, focusing on how to operate as an efficient crew with the Stinger. It will last two weeks and consist of the following learning activities:

“First will be how to detect, interrogate, and identify aircraft. Second, general engagement procedures. Third, methods of engaging aircraft. Fourth, team operations. Fifth, team radio procedures. Sixth, early warning methods. Seventh, relations with fellow combat units supported by the Stinger. Eighth will be mobility and combat loading, and ninth will be system support capabilities.”

Laing continued, illustrating each of the learning activities of lesson two. The simple visuals helped communicate the points as Simon maintained pace with his translations. Again Laing asked for questions. No one ventured any.

“All right. Lesson three will be concerned with familiarizing you with training devices. You’ll be using them not only here in training, but also when you return to Afghanistan, to increase your practice time with the Stinger. Don’t worry. There’ll be plenty of time to go over the materials during the rest of your stay.

“Now, when you hear your name, please go over to the man holding up the placard with your group number on it,” explained Laing, pointing to different parts of the hangar and giving the cue to each of the soldiers holding placards to hold them up for all to see.

“Group One—Fareed Mirza [Khan](#), Ghulam Ahmed [Khan](#), and Akhter [Mujahid](#) Malik. Group Two—Irfan Karim [Khan](#), Usman [Khan](#), and Ahmed Ghani. Group Three—Abdul Rahman [Khan](#), Saleem [Khan](#), and Sikander [Khan](#). Group Four—Jamshed Ali, Dilawar Hussain [Khan](#), and Shahid Waheed. Group Five—Massoud Ahmed [Khan](#), Wali [Khan](#), and Hamza Ali [Khan](#).”

As the names were read out, each of the [mujahideen](#) arose and walked over to the SAS officer holding the applicable placard.

“Andy!” exclaimed Sikander, recognizing the man holding a placard with a large number three painted on it. His companions followed, equally happy to see him after missing him all day. Although he was clearly pleased to see them, he didn’t answer.

The following ten days were long and grueling. Andy was the main instructor for Abdul Rahman’s group, but in contrast to the cozy relationship with him as Aamir in Laghar Juy, he was no friend when it came to driving them hard and challenging them to avoid mistakes. Anyone could pick up a Stinger and with only a little training fire it toward an enemy aircraft. However, to have a strong chance of success required practice and an intimate knowledge of how the system worked.

Ten days had passed when lesson one was over. By now, Sikander, Saleem, and Abdul Rahman were able to name all the Stinger’s key components. They knew how to handle the weapon’s grip stock assembly and the secondary missile round, and understood how to attach the battery coolant unit, or BCU. One part of the weapon requiring no consideration was the Identification-Friend-or-Foe (IFF) System, whose role was to emit an interrogation signal to a target and invoke a coded response from it. A correct response meant that the target was a friendly aircraft. In Afghanistan, there was no such thing.

After each learning activity, there were test questions and only when every man in a group received at least a seventy percent score could that group proceed to the next activity. Sikander scored eighty-five percent, Abdul Rahman likewise. Saleem edged them out at a stellar ninety percent.

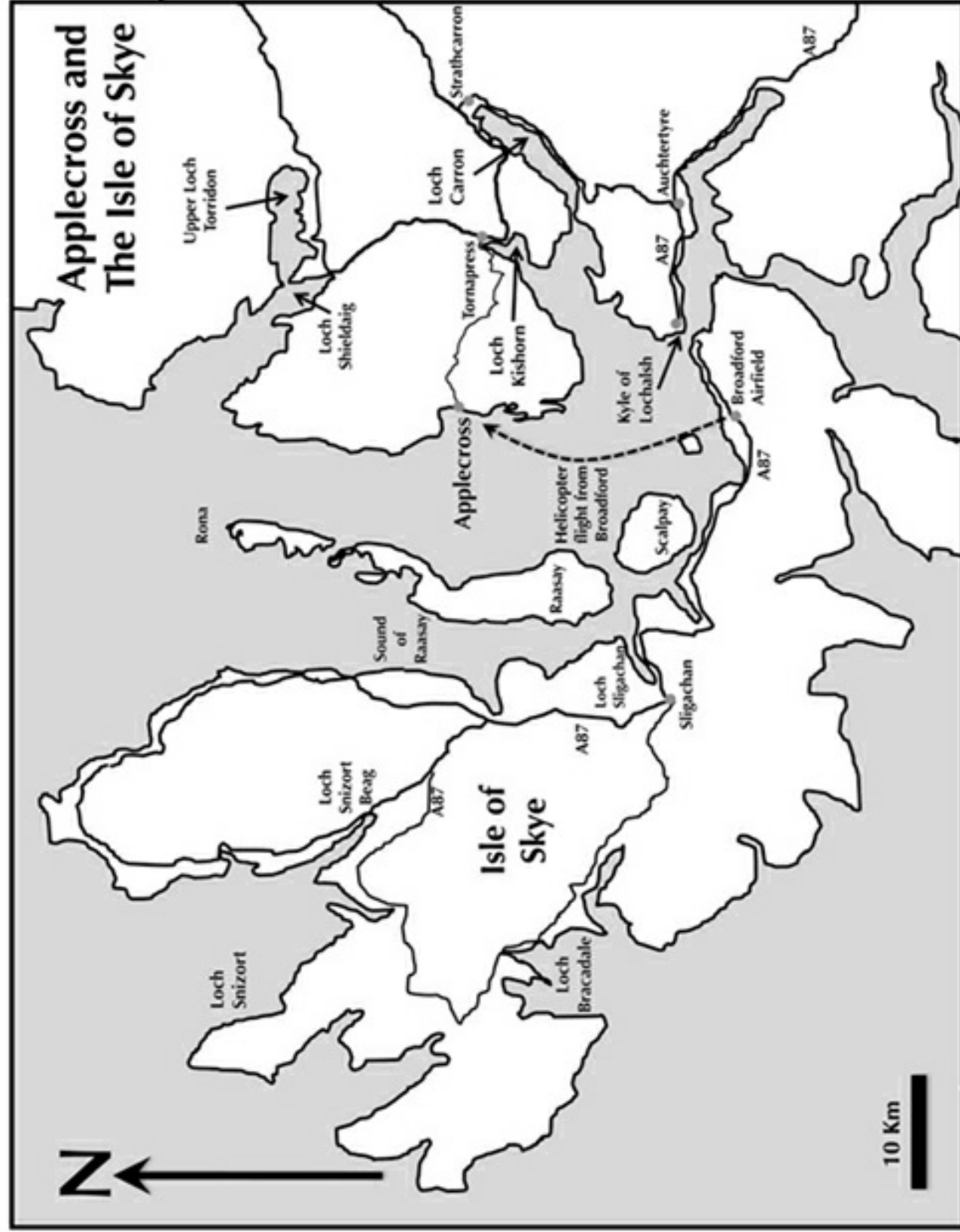
When they were not in intense training, the men were free to roam the camp during breaks or in the evenings. At these times, Sikander loved to go out and take in the air. He couldn’t get over how air could “taste” so different from one part of the world to another and how sweet it could be.

Applecross had to be one of the most beautiful places on earth. Sure, the Swat and Kaghan valleys, the Karakorams, and the western peaks of the [Spin Ghar](#), were by any measure stunning. But here, in this serene little corner of Scotland, was a place whose beauty didn’t clamor for attention. Instead, with tranquil humility, Applecross made an innocent appeal to be appreciated, and reached more deeply into the human spirit than simply to stir the taste buds of the eyes. The SAS training facility grounds reached up to the water’s edge and Sikander often stood by the chain-link fence at its boundary, to embrace the breeze in the early morning or evening, and gaze out over the peaceful autumn water.

As the sun rose, the hills across the water about a dozen kilometers away on the islands of Scalpay, Raasay, and Rona were brightly lit, while behind them were the rolling furry mountains at the southern end of Skye. In the evening, the setting sun emitted shafts of orange light through the gaps in those mountains before being masked by them, giving each a heavenly red halo before disappearing only to return the next day. Sikander had no idea of the names of these places, but such obscurity simply added to their enchantment.



British Isles



10 Km

One evening, after a long day in the classroom, he stood at his favorite spot overlooking the islands and hills across the water. Their anonymity provided an ironic parallel. In this nameless paradise, he was learning how to kill people whose names he would never know. They would be trying their best to kill him without knowing who he was. Each would be acting out of reasons only vaguely understood by them, but largely to avoid their own deaths. And it wouldn't end there. Who knew how many disasters might be spawned by any one of those deaths? Or for that matter, by that same death not occurring?

As Sikander wrestled with such impossible questions in the full grip of the slowly shifting light of the vista before him, a voice called out from behind.

"Peaceful, isn't it?"

Sikander turned. "Irfan. [Assalaamu 'alaykum](#)." He returned to the scene, anxious not to miss even a moment of its captivating mystery.

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#), Sikander. The soldiers have arranged for a volleyball net so that we can get some exercise after all these classroom lessons. I'd like to play on your side...if you're interested in playing, that is," offered Irfan tentatively.

Without turning, Sikander lowered his gaze. He recalled the last time he had played volleyball. It was at school. He had argued with the referee, and was dismissed for "failing to appreciate why the game was being played." He turned to Irfan. "Of course."

Irfan beamed.

Recollections of school soon gave way to thoughts of home. "Missing your family back home like I am, Irfan?" Sikander asked casually.

Irfan sidled up to the fence, considered the question, and staring at the shimmering water beyond the fence he replied, "Sikander I uh...I only have Usman, who's here with me. My parent, two brothers, and sister were killed in 1982." Irfan smiled weakly. Resigned to his powerlessness over a fate that had thus shaped his young character, he simply shrugged and uttered, "Helicopter attack."

"Irfan I...I'm sorry." Sikander realized the indelicacy inherent in any casually presumptive reference to family with a fellow [mujahid](#). How could he have been so insensitive to the probability of lost loved ones, after so many years of war? He continued apologizing. Irfan continued insisting it was unnecessary.

The volleyball net was erected inside the main hangar where the full group briefings normally took place. It was a helpful release to be able to play, and soon, the visitors had mastered the rules but more importantly, the game. Two teams were established, each consisting of six men, and as three of the [mujahideen](#) were not interested in playing, the numbers worked out. Irfan and Sikander turned out to be the strongest players and were soon forced to play on opposite sides despite their clear enjoyment at being able to trounce their opponents when playing together. As lesson two continued for two more weeks, the bond between Sikander, Saleem, and Abdul Rahman grew stronger as did their collective attachments to Irfan, Usman, and Ahmed Ghani, who was an extremely quiet and shy individual. However, between Sikander and Irfan, a special friendship had begun to flourish.

Early on in training, the young men from Laghar Juy were inclined to blame each other for any shortcomings, especially as the group could not progress to the next learning activity until everyone scored above seventy percent on the prevailing activity. Sikander edged ahead of Saleem in accumulated scores during lesson two, while the latter remained significantly ahead of Abdul Rahman. Eventually they each came to understand that taking responsibility meant collectively accepting the blame for mistakes as much as the credit for success. They also learned how to act reliably and instinctively through the surprisingly many steps needed to ready a weapon or reload a missile round and fire it accurately for an effective hit.

Nowhere was the need for teamwork more demanding than in recognizing, interrogating, and aiming at a target. Using a Stinger was a two-person task and the training had to ensure that any of a group's three possible pairings could work effectively. Three and a half weeks into their training, lesson two was over.

Lesson three, a short two days, directed their focus on full hands-on experience, involving working with practice missile launchers and missile rounds. They had to pay special attention to the numerous precautions and safety features that the Stinger incorporated, without which it would either fail to operate or be lethal to the wrong people.

With the lessons complete, the [mujahideen](#) were reassembled in the hangar where Captain Laing was ready to describe what awaited them.

"Fellow [mujahideen](#), we've been here for over three weeks and you've trained long and hard in the classroom and, more recently, with your practice equipment. You've learned how to work reliably and quickly. That's what you'll need to do when you use these weapons in earnest against a real foe. Now there's going to be one final test. We're going to ask the top two scoring pairs from each of the five groups to fire a live missile. We'll take you by helicopter into the mountains where a firing range has been set up. Here are the firing pairs."

When he reached group three, Laing pronounced, "Group Three, pair one, Sikander [Khan](#) and Abdul Rahman [Khan](#), and pair two—Saleem [Khan](#) and Sikander [Khan](#)." When all pairs had been named, Laing concluded the announcement. Thrilled to be in two live firing sessions, Sikander tried to keep his demeanor to a dignified modesty under back slapping congratulations from both Abdul Rahman and Saleem.

Captain Laing went on to describe the procedure in more detail but finished with a surprise. "Everyone, you've spent almost a month inside this camp and you must be feeling...well, like prisoners!" Laing emitted a nervous chuckle. "It's not our intention to treat you that way, and we know you understand the requirement for secrecy. However, we've obtained permission to take you on a bus tour of these remarkably beautiful islands tomorrow. It's an excellent time of year to appreciate the scenery.

"We'll take food with us from the camp and won't stop in any shops or village communities. To avoid suspicion, we're going to ask you to wear British Army uniforms. Now, uh, most of you have long beards, and they're generally longer than we give permission for in Her Majesty's armed forces. We're therefore asking you to...to trim your beards. Not to shave them off, mind you. Just to keep them to a few centimeters. We've inquired of religious experts in [Sunni Islam](#) who say this is acceptable. If any of you still feel you don't wish to do this, of course, we'll understand and respect that, but I'm afraid you won't be able to come with us."

Simon translated but his own independent hesitations reflected those of Laing. Sikander had learned by now that Simon was more than simply a speaker of [Pashto](#). Having familiarized himself with the many nuances of [Pashtun](#) and Muslim life, Simon had sensitized his captain on the question of the beards when making the case for the road trip. Even so, as he translated the part about cutting beards, a rumbling began to emerge from the seated [mujahideen](#). Mere translation of Laing's words wasn't going to do the trick. He paused for a moment, glanced at Laing and again at the audience. And then, Simon did something remarkable.

He began to describe many [hadiths](#) and the rulings of the eighth-century [Imam](#) Abu Hanifa, who had declared that trimming of a beard from the sides, while leaving the end to be at least a fist size in length, was acceptable. Needless to say, many in the room were taken aback by Simon's grasp of

the subject. It added to their growing realization that truly dedicated and special people were assisting them.

Those with the problem beards who wanted to go were directed to one of the [mujahideen](#) to do the trimming. In the end, twelve men had adequately trimmed or originally short enough beards to take the trip.

That evening Andy came over to see his three friends. He wanted to revisit the preparation necessary to complete the firing range practice successfully. Only when he was satisfied that his protégés would do him proud did he leave the cabin, offering a parting acknowledgment of the following day's trip and declaring that he was looking forward to it.

The bus arrived at seven the next morning and twelve "plausibly British" soldiers, with Andy and Simon as chaperones, climbed aboard. With short drapes initially drawn over each window, the bus departed. The tour was extensive, beginning with a drive north along the coast of the Applecross Peninsula, then southeast over the hills toward Tornapress along the Bealach na Ba or "Pass of the Cattle"—in parts, one of the steepest roads in the U.K. En route to Tornapress, Simon and Andy drew back the drapes.

At Tornapress, the bus passed through Strathcarron and on to Auchtertyre, where they joined the much faster A87 road to get across to the island of Skye from Kyle of Lochalsh. Not long after the crossing, the bus drove past Broadford airfield, which Sikander thought he recognized from the prominent but simple building that he had seen near one end of the runway after landing that first night in Scotland.

The rest of the trip took them around Skye, remaining on the A87 until reaching the tiny village of Borve. This was the northernmost point of the trip and was where they stopped just outside the village, to absorb the views and take their lunch. The road became once again a little narrower but prettier as the bus took the western route around the island to rejoin the A87 at the southern end of Loch Sligachan. At this time, the sun was past its zenith and even though October was already over, the weather was spectacular. The mountains to the south of the road rose sharply to their highest point on Skye and presented a beautiful backdrop to the rolling green landscape on the other side of the road.

Whatever happened, Sikander determined, he would do everything in his power to come back to this heaven on earth, assuming he could ever discover where it was. He tried to memorize some of the place names from the road signs he saw along the route, but they were numerous and not easily pronounced by a young [Pathan](#) from Peshawar.

After the day of respite came a flood of energy to resume their training. Immediately after [fajr](#) the following morning, the [mujahideen](#) were ready for the final test—the live firing of a Stinger. No time was lost in getting them airlifted by Chinook to the mountains southeast of the camp. But for the weather and flora, the terrain was about as perfect a replica of the Afghan hills as could be realized in Scotland.

The layout of the range suggested elaborate planning and setup. Captain Laing took the official role of the officer in charge, or OIC, with several others to assist him. There was a safety officer, a range firing officer, and an ammunition officer to ensure delivery and safe storage of all weapons. Five weapons rounds and five additional missile rounds had been delivered, along with five dummy rounds and all necessary accessories.

Also stationed at this location was the target detail officer, responsible for the target launch and control area from which remotely controlled targets were to be flown.

At the front of the range, five evenly spaced firing stations had been prepared, from which missiles firings would be taking place. Behind each was a tracking station to track both targets and missiles and report on performance. Behind them was a tower from which the OIC could monitor the entire proceedings.

Sikander and Abdul Rahman were asked to go to the third firing station to join Andy, who awaited them. Each non-firing trainee was asked to stand in the corresponding tracking station, from where he could practice tracking the same target that was being fired upon by his colleagues up ahead.

To Sikander and Abdul Rahman's left were Irfan and Usman, both eager to demonstrate their new skills. To their right were Shahid and Dilawar. Each two-man team would have to acquire, interrogate, recognize, track, and shoot down a radio controlled one-sixth scale target. At almost a kilometer, the model presented the same target acquisition challenge as a jet fighter six kilometers away doing almost 650 kilometers per hour. Once the target was acquired and the missile launched, everything was down to the missile's guidance system, beyond any reach of the gunner's skill. The exercise further entailed demonstrating proficiency in removing a spent missile tube and readying a fresh missile round for the next firing. The second pair in the team was then to fire the second missile before removing its spent tube and readying the weapon once again, but in that case with a dummy missile round, thereby concluding the test. All the grading factors associated with prior training tests were applicable on this occasion, which itself was to be separately graded.

The tests began in earnest with each group going in sequence. Group three's turn came. As the firing coach, Andy called out "Activate!" Sikander screwed in a BCU, slid forward the safety actuator switch and latched it down. He instinctively recalled the steps, tracking his target in a sweeping but steady arc, and with his left forefinger depressed the uncage switch while his right forefinger hovered over the fire trigger.

Once there was positive confirmation for "Weapons Free!" called out by the firing coach, based on the OIC's clearance, all discretion was in Sikander's hands. The BCU's high-pressure argon gas quickly cooled down the device's infrared sensor, making it possible for the guidance system to draw a contrast between the sensor's temperature and the natural heat given off by the target. Sure enough, in a few seconds the system emitted the target-acquisition tone, prompting Sikander to squeeze the trigger.

A cracking sound heralded the launch sequence as the launch tube's rear cover broke away resulting from the launch motor's activation, spewing out a small jet blast toward the rear. Hurling forward, the missile immediately shattered the front infrared sensor window and drew out a lanyard, which was supposed to become taut and pull away from the rear of the missile when it was nine meters in front of the launcher. The launch motor fell on cue, and as the lanyard pulled away, it ignited the boost-sustainment rocket motor. The missile, which had thus far displayed an unimpressive hop from the launch tube, sped away with a transformed and deadly personality, accelerating to almost 750 meters per second in the unerring pursuit of its quarry. Almost immediately the boost rocket shut down, leaving the missile in "sustained propulsion" mode. Barely five seconds passed before the Stinger found its mark and exploded, extinguishing all evidence of the target's existence.

Fleeting paralyzed by what he had just accomplished, Sikander let out a shriek of delight as the moment's reality sank in. He sought approval from Abdul Rahman, who had helped him set up the weapon and acquire the target. Abdul Rahman was likewise visibly delighted while well on his way to readying the next round. Meanwhile, Sikander removed the spent missile tube and as soon as Abdul Rahman handed it to him, he latched the new round in place, and set the weapon down on the rack to await its next angry moment.

The tests continued largely with the expected levels of performance owing to everyone's preparedness. Actions requiring the trainees' focus were by now second nature based on all the repetitive training that had taken place prior to this day. When the tests were finally over, the [mujahideen](#) were once again lifted out by Chinook and returned to their camp, feeling proud and confident.

The following day was the final briefing day, their last in Scotland. As they filed into the hangar one last time, Captain Laing, Andy, and Simon as

well as the other officers stood in a row against the front wall of the room. Laing began his parting speech.

“[Mujahideen](#), our warmest congratulations! Yesterday you all demonstrated your proficiency with one of the most advanced and effective weapons systems in the world. Not only have you done so, but also, in *most* cases,”—he threw a glance in Sikander’s direction—“you’ve done this with little or no formal education and have shown that you can be a well organized, disciplined, and deadly air defense force. The Soviets and [DRA](#) are continuing to devastate your homeland, and with this weapon system you will finally have your chance to neutralize their air advantage in this fight. Together, we’ve spent the last month familiarizing you with the Stinger...and we’ve become familiar with each of you. To us, whose true identities must remain secret, you’re like members of our family and, I know...” Laing’s throat tightened as his voice waivered, “I know that for many of you, this might well be the only family you have now after the losses of this terrible conflict. Tomorrow you’ll be leaving us and we will not, in all likelihood, meet again, but we want you to know that we won’t forget you, nor your dedication and commitment. We’ll always value the bond that brought us together. This bond allows me today to consider you to be brother SAS soldiers, and with your permission, for us to be your brother [mujahideen](#)! Once again, our congratulations. We wish you God speed, [fi-amanillah](#), and farewell.”

When the speech was over, Abdul Rahman stood up and called out “[Takbeer](#)!”

In unison came back the chorus of “[Allahu Akbar](#)!” Again he called out, and again came back the same chorus after which the whole room cheered as each person stood up, greeted, and shook the hands of the ones nearest him. When they settled down, Andy stepped onto the stage and gave his own moving statement while informing the [mujahideen](#) that at the back of the hangar were their completion certificates. Although it lacked the same meaning as in an advanced and modern army, and although most [mujahideen](#) would have been hard-pressed to find a picture frame, much less mount and display a certificate, they nevertheless picked them up and held them as prized possessions. After the briefing was over, Sikander, Saleem, and Abdul Rahman, with heavy hearts, went to greet Captain Laing, Andy, and Simon. The latter two had been friends of theirs for more than two months now and would be sorely missed.

“Will you be coming back with us to Laghar Juy?” Sikander asked.

“Yes,” replied Simon. “But only to be sure that the first batch of Stingers arrive safely and then we’ll have to move on to find more of you people to recruit and repeat this program on a larger scale. Let’s hope they can match your outstanding skills,” he added as he met their eyes.

The rest of the day was open for the visitors—no longer referred to as trainees—to do as they pleased. Still unable to leave the camp, they roamed it freely, taking in their last day of the Applecross air. It was mostly cloudy, but the sun peeked through from time to time, or on the hills surrounding them, threw shafts of light in a slow dance coordinated by the clouds. The light along with the fresh, early November breeze would be imprinted on their memories for the rest of their lives and the men knew it.

Many of them couldn’t sleep that night in anticipation of the long journey back. It would take at least five days for the return trip since they would be moving much more slowly with their mules packed with Stinger systems. It was just past midnight and Saleem and Usman were asleep. Lying in his lower bunk across from Sikander, Irfan was in a thoughtful mood.

“Sikander? You awake?”

“Yes.”

“Do you suppose once we’ve returned we’ll...see each other again?”

“I don’t know, Irfan. I suppose we might. If our people come across to Khost, or if you come up to [Tora Bora](#) or any of the villages in the hills to the south of Laghar Juy, or—but then again, probably not.”

“Well,” said Irfan, “you know Usman and I are the only family to each other and we’re both honored to have come to know the three of you. If...if anything—Allah forbid—should happen to either of us, I’d like to know that the other could seek you out in Laghar Juy and...seek your protection? You know, life isn’t very kind to orphans in Afghanistan and—”

“Irfan, you and Usman *are* like brothers. I myself was taken in by Brother Abdul Rahman’s family and his parents are truly fine people. If you could only meet his father, you’d know he’d welcome you in his village. Especially after—Allah forbid—something like that.”

“I’m lucky to have found you, friend. [InshaAllah](#) I won’t worry what happens to Usman if...well, you know.”

Sikander felt awkward. He acknowledged the words of confidence and affection from Irfan in an appropriately courteous manner, excusing himself to get some sleep. Irfan understood.

Sikander didn’t sleep. Irfan’s words reverberated in his mind. He had yet to get over having discovered that a single moment had transformed these two boys’ lives and terminated those of so many of their loved ones. The thought soon led to others about his own family back in Hayatabad. With memories of the last two and a half months rolling around in his head, it was more than enough to keep him awake until dawn.

After [fajr](#), with Abdul Rahman as [imam](#), the [mujahideen](#) made ready for their long trip home. As they packed their few possessions, now including their certificates and army-issued clothing and boots, Andy sauntered into the cabin. The SAS had long discovered that reveille served no purpose, as these people were naturally awake before sunrise anyway. For the brief moment he opened the door, the chopping of the Chinook’s twin rotors invaded the room.

“It’s time.” Andy pronounced.

Everyone completed the last of their packing and proceeded reluctantly out of the cabin. Following heavy footfalls across the tarmac to the awaiting helicopter’s open ramp door, they filed silently in.

Sikander was the last to enter. Before stepping up the ramp, he took a final look back at the cabin, the camp, and, in the distance, a solemn-looking James Laing, saluting them. Sikander waved and watching him, his colleagues joined in. They took their seats, the ramp door was sealed, and the giant machine took to the air.

The atmosphere inside was naturally somber, as the [mujahideen](#) took with them all the imagery their eyes were able to absorb.

Near the horizon, the low morning sun snuck in under the cloud base, painting the bottoms of the clouds a loud dusky-pink as it illuminated the emerald landscape below. It cast long, edge-defining shadows of every bush, tree, and fieldstone wall, while in places, stray, gray brush strokes of morning mist appeared to be smeared over the painting beneath. As if to dissuade them from leaving, nature had organized a spectacular gesture from Applecross to its exotic guests. To many of the men, having missed her for so long in their own lives, this was the seductive stranger called, Peace.

The Chinook continued to climb.

On November 7, at one in the afternoon, the PAF C130 touched down in Sargodha. This was to be where the [mujahideen](#) would bid farewell to their newfound friends, going their separate ways across the rugged landscape to their respective provinces in Afghanistan. After the aircraft came to a

standstill, the cargo door opened and holding on to their turbans while the massive turboprops were still running, the [mujahideen](#) disembarked. They filed into a dispatch building as instructed. Once inside, many traditional hugs were exchanged along with impossible-to-keep promises of remaining in touch.

“Okay. Let’s go,” said Andy to his team. His four companions took his lead and departed the building. As they emerged onto the parking lot, like an old, but loyal dog the dirty Pajero was the first thing to greet them. Standing beside it and grinning was the second.

Having greeted his friends warmly, Junaid urged them into the vehicle, and set off for Peshawar.

“So? How’d it go?” he asked.

Andy jumped in. He didn’t want Junaid to be compromised with too much information. Junaid had no specifics on the location nor even that Aamir and Yassir were, in fact, Andy and Simon. Andy wanted to keep it that way.

“It went very well. Very well.”

“Well, it’s not a moment too soon. The Russians are hammering away at our people and we have to do something. I can’t tell you how pleased I am with what I’ve heard about these new weapons. Really pleased!”

Idle chitchatting about other aspects of the support operation ensued, with most of the travelers napping in the vehicle from time to time after the long flight and the short night they had just experienced. The plan was for Junaid to take them to Arif’s place in Jamrud. By nightfall, he did just that.



Chapter 7

Stinger

THE MUJAHIDEEN HAD TO wait an extra two days in Jamrud for the arrival of their first battery of Stingers. When the shipment arrived, enclosed in green painted aluminum containers were eight weapon rounds each combining missile and grip stock assembly. Four replacement rounds, each containing just a missile in its tube together with three BCUs, came packed in thin plywood containers. A total of twelve distinct firing opportunities were thus available. A couple of proficiency practice systems were also in the shipment. The missiles had been flown into Peshawar and trucked over to Arif's place, where the men were staying. As before, Sikander managed to dispatch a written message to his family via Junaid, but was crestfallen to learn that the lines were temporarily down in Jamrud, leaving Arif's phone out of action. Returning to Laghar Juy was a priority so there was no question of waiting around for repairs.

No Pajero, thought Sikander, as every bump and hollow was amplified by the ten-ton troop carrier's overworked suspension on its way into the Khyber Pass. It doubled in this case as transportation for both the missiles and the travelers. They left the pass for the familiar staging house to transfer their cargo to mules. Another night's stay at that place and they readied eight mules to ferry everything back to Laghar Juy.

Sikander was delighted to discover that Kala and Neela were among them, and staked his claim on Neela before anyone else. She had been a dependable animal on his first trip, and Sikander was half convinced she recognized him when she took a couple of steps in his direction as if also laying claim on him.

Trekking over the mountains was arduous on this occasion. Although the missiles were not heavy, their elongated cases presented challenges. Each mule could handle one on each side, and like splints they limited the mules' ability to bend their torsos to make the numerous turns up and down the switchbacks in the hills. On several occasions, the animals lost their footing and struggled to remain on all fours, but the more they traveled, the more impressed Sikander became with their perseverance. Given the urgency to return to Afghanistan, and with the moon approaching full phase, they continued until well after dark before resting.

As Sikander crossed the mountains with his companions, this time with significantly more confidence than on the first occasion, he couldn't help recalling how different from Laghar Juy his experiences of the past four weeks had been. A yawning gulf stood between the realities he had been exposed to in less than half a year. His mind constantly revisited these accumulating memories as if to make sure that none of them would somehow fall off the edges of his consciousness like the contents of some overcrowded desktop. He thought of Peshawar and Dubai and spending the nights in the Khyber Mountains, and the beautiful hills and water of Scotland at a place whose name remained a mystery.

While thinking about these experiences, Sikander realized that his memories weren't simply to be stored and retrieved by his separate persona. Indeed, they were part of the landscape of his very being, shaping who, and what, he was becoming. Gazing at the crystalline moon and stars that night, he felt extremely small, but with the cargo and the skills they were taking back into Afghanistan, he did not feel insignificant.

Arriving back in Laghar Juy, the men were welcomed with excitement and relief after their long absence. Among the welcoming villagers, only Abdul Majeed and Abdul Latif had any idea of what was in the oddly long containers accompanying them.

A week before their arrival, Rabia, knowing that the month was almost up, decided to embroider handkerchiefs with welcoming messages for each of the three travelers. She had finished those for Abdul Rahman and Saleem, but the one for Sikander had only progressed to the level of her stitching his name in the middle but with none of the welcoming message. At Razya's home she eagerly handed them out, eliciting warm thanks and compliments for her artistic efforts from Abdul Rahman and Saleem. When Rabia came to Sikander, she avoided eye contact with him and chose instead to cast a stare at the handkerchief as she held it out for him, sufficiently embarrassed to avoid explaining its unfinished condition.

"Well, I don't know, Rabia," Sikander responded playfully, appearing to study her handiwork, as he picked at a corner of it. "I mean, it doesn't seem quite ready, does it?"

Rabia's mask of demureness evaporated in an instant. In its place was an indignant frown of now amplified embarrassment. Not knowing what to do, she thrust the rest of the handkerchief into his hand and hastily retreated home. Sikander in turn became embarrassed at his clumsy attempt at humor, but rules of conduct for a young man in his position prevented him from chasing after her. Mortified at the seeming pain he'd caused, he turned to Saleem, wearing an apologetic expression. Saleem nodded sagely. He would fix things with his sister.

Only a day after arriving, the time came for "Aamir" and "Yassir" to leave for [Tora Bora](#), Khost, and Qandahar. It was impossible for the newly returned young men to display to the rest of the villagers the strength of the bond that had been formed with these SAS officers. The three of them, together with Abdul Latif, Abdul Majeed, and Ejaz, offered to escort the two men up the slopes until they were effectively out of sight of the village. At this point the parting could be in a manner more in keeping with their friendship.

"You know," said Andy, remaining in the character of Aamir, "you three were in the first group of Haqqani's men that we put through that program and you came through it better than Hekmatyar's men did! Frankly, you surprised our people back in the camp and they're all trying to see how to make it tougher for the next lot," he joked.

"In any case, we're both really proud of how you handled yourselves, and we wanted you to have these." He pulled out a pouch from inside one of the wrapped-up bundles carried by his mule and presented their three traveling companions each with a Cabot Watch Company automatic wristwatch, explaining to them that this was what full-fledged British Army soldiers were issued. "You've bloody well earned them, fellas!" he said, neglecting to speak in [Pashto](#).

Ejaz cast a quizzical glance at his brother, puzzled by the unintelligible words. Saleem gave a reassuring nod to convey that an explanation would be forthcoming.

Simon cut in, "We'd like to believe we're professionals who focus on the mission and follow orders, but we do care about what you're trying to accomplish here. We're going to remember you and the other [mujahideen](#), and the time we shared with you." Simon paused. "Anyhow, [Allah Hafiz](#)! God will be with you in your struggle, and don't forget now—" he drew in a little closer to Abdul Rahman and with a friendly prodding on the chest, drove home the point in a low voice, "in a few months we'd like to be reading the newspapers about how the Russians were driven out of Afghanist—"

Simon was unable to continue. He simply followed with "[Allah Hafiz](#)!" before turning around and walking up the slopes with Andy and their two mules. It didn't take long for the figures to disappear against the backdrop of the hills.

Sikander never saw them again.

Abdul Latif, Ejaz, and Abdul Majeed looked on, moved by the sadness on all sides. The six escorts turned back toward the village. As Sikander,

Abdul Rahman, and Saleem compared their identical gifts, Ejaz sidled up alongside Saleem.

“What was that?” he asked, combining curiosity with complaint. His eyes darted between the other two returnees looking for a revelation of some sort. “Saleem?” he pressed.

“Aamir and Yassir aren’t who they appear to be,” responded a giddy Saleem.

“Well, yes...but who are they?”

“They’re British military officers, brother, and they are very good at what they do.”

“English, you mean?” asked Ejaz, making little progress with his brother.

“That’s right! Imagine our surprise when we first learned of it.”

Abdul Rahman, Sikander, and Abdul Latif exchanged knowing glances. The group proceeded down into the village with Ejaz finally getting the explanation he was looking for. He felt envious at what he’d missed, but mostly he was pleased that his brother and the others had made it safely back.

Rabia didn’t take long to be persuaded that Sikander’s poor taste in humor should be forgiven. In less than three days, she was almost her usual self toward him.

One evening, after a combined family meal, Sikander picked up several dishes and walked into the back where she had already begun cleaning them. Having gone to the washroom, Noor wasn’t with her daughter as she might ordinarily have been, and the rest of the family members were gathering the remaining dishes. Sikander seized his opportunity to deliver a direct apology.

“Rabia, um, about the handkerchief. It was insensitive...what I said, I mean. I shouldn’t have said it. You made an effort to welcome us back and I... I poked fun at it.”

“Yes. You did, Sikander. But I’m over it now, and you don’t need to bring it up again.”

“So...I’m forgiven?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“But?”

“But it’ll take more than just words, Sikander.”

“I see. What did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I’m not sure yet, but you’ll know when the time comes.” The gleam was back in Rabia’s eye, leaving Sikander sure of only one thing. Her [badal](#) would be fitting. Sikander returned to the main room to collect more dishes just as Noor came back.

Sikander and Rabia continued to interact, though always in the shadow of Noor or Razya. Rabia pressed Sikander to tell her of his recent adventure. Unsure of what he should or shouldn’t reveal, he made his descriptions of the trip enchanting, but terse.

It was mid November and those fields designated for poppy had to be planted. The hardy crop could easily survive in weedy and rough soil as long as it was planted now. Although they understood something of the negative effects of addiction to the refined heroin that came from their opium, the villagers gave it little thought, seeing it as a necessary cash crop.

November rolled into December and life in Laghar Juy was mostly calm, punctuated occasionally by the distant sounds of fighting. The Soviets and the [DRA](#) were clearly uninterested in trying to invade and hold territory in the rural areas, preferring to focus on the larger cities and the main routes between them. Yet that didn’t stop them from attacking villages in which their reconnaissance had shown [mujahideen](#) resistance building up or in conducting reprisals against whichever village their own intelligence suggested was responsible for the most recent ambush. Likewise, the [mujahideen](#) maintained a close watch on arms or troop buildups and would typically try to ambush them during any force movement.

With winter closing in, there was a lull in the fighting and Abdul Latif used this brief time of peace to train his villagers to be more effective in tactics and the use of weapons.

Sikander grew increasingly proficient with his [AK-47](#). He was outshooting Abdul Majeed—the acknowledged marksman of the family—about half the time. He finally grasped some of the nuances of his weapon, which he, along with the others, had retrieved back in Jamrud. It had a slight tendency to pull to the left, which he quickly learned to allow for, and he also mastered the super-elevation required to compensate for gravity, but he was still working on leading with his aim on moving targets. Whenever the “brothers joined him” they practiced procedures for a Stinger attack with the training hardware. They had been given specific instructions about practicing to maintain proficiency but they enjoyed putting on a show for others. It was also an ideal time to introduce both Abdul Majeed and Ejaz to some of the simpler aspects of supporting the operation of the Stinger.

The women of the extended family busied themselves with preparations for the wedding. Everyone agreed to postpone the date until May. Too much attention had been consumed by repair and reconstruction efforts after September’s attacks and Hinna’s family was in any case far from ready. The delay brought welcome relief.

Since Rabia was the only girl available of similar figure to Hinna, she was chosen to model the bride’s new clothes, including the [lehenga](#) suit for the wedding. Ejaz was naturally called upon to try on those being made for him and he enjoyed critiquing both, always in good humor, but often to the annoyance of his mother and aunt.

More than once, Sikander happened to be present during such trial fittings and had to be discreet in his own reactions to Rabia. She was becoming a young woman whom he had to admit he was growing increasingly fond of, a fact not lost on the keenly observant Razya, who was routinely at Noor’s place working with her on the sewing.

To an Afghan woman of Razya’s age, it was a matter of significant prestige to arrange a match between an eligible boy and girl, and though she was happy for Ejaz, she couldn’t hide her disappointment at having been robbed by circumstance in his case.

On the morning of December 13, Tahir, a man from Anarbagh village, whom Abdul Latif knew well, hurried on horseback to Laghar Juy. He brought news from Jalalabad. “[Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#), brother!” he greeted Abdul Latif, who was walking home from Noor’s with Sikander and Abdul Rahman.

“[Wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#), Tahir. What brings you here in such a hurry?”

“It’s the [DRA](#). They’re readying another attack on this area. They haven’t forgotten the pounding you gave them and their Russian friends in September. Their reprisal wasn’t sufficient payback as far as they’re concerned and they’ve been waiting for your planting to be done before getting their complete [badal](#). Do what you can to prepare yourselves.”

Sikander was intrigued by how the age-old [Pashtunwali](#) notion of [badal](#) pervaded even the Afghan army. Unless the retribution felt equitable, those seeking revenge would be left with the gnawing sense that more should have been done, while having to live down likely ridicule from friends and family.

Abdul Latif stroked his rusty beard. “Any idea when?”

“Indications are it’ll be three days from now, but honestly? I wouldn’t rely on that. It could be tomorrow, or they may just let the weather decide.”

“Hm... What kind of attack force?”

“Hinds, most likely. If they’ve waited for everyone around here to be done with planting, it would make sense to be targeting the fields. I don’t think they have any relish for a close combat engagement. Costs them too many defections,” Tahir snickered.

Whenever soldiers from the [DRA](#) forces were treated well in captivity or managed to “sell” their weapons in exchange for security and protection, word spread and encouraged more of their colleagues to change sides, while limiting unnecessary loss of life. It also meant debilitating consequences for the enemy. Any such transfers subtracted from their forces and added to the [mujahideen](#)—always a much better outcome for the [mujahideen](#) than a simple enemy loss. In many cases, the only deterrent to switching sides was the knowledge that the government could retaliate by harming a soldier’s family.

“Remember, brother, Anarbagh has a [ghundi](#) with Laghar Juy as do other villages in these parts, so let us know if you need us to come,” Tahir reminded his friend.

Abdul Latif pondered the situation. Obviously the [jirga](#) would need to be informed, but he already understood what to do.

“Brother Tahir, [JazaakAllah](#) for the information. We’ll prepare to evacuate the village by tomorrow evening and post lookouts on high ground to the south. In the meantime, you’re welcome to stay with us before heading back to Anarbagh if you’d like.”

Tahir accepted the offer, and Abdul Latif’s house was naturally where he would stay. By now it was understood that whenever guests stayed at Abdul Latif’s place, Sikander spent the night with Noor’s family, which he didn’t mind doing as it was barely fifty meters away. That night was to be no exception, but in the late afternoon, just before Sikander was about to leave, Abdul Latif asked his sons and Sikander to meet with Ejaz and Saleem, to redouble their exercises in readiness for a helicopter attack. They were the only ones with any training on the Stinger and it would be down to them to lead the defense.

The three young men marched to Noor’s home, found Ejaz and Saleem, and proceeded into the open yard at the back of the house to practice with their proficiency training hardware. They were eager to demonstrate their new skills in more than just the childish make-believe way that it seemed to require.

Indeed, the young men appeared to Rabia like overgrown schoolboys playing with sticks for weapons. Repeatedly, she secretly peeked through the square opening that was the kitchen’s window into the backyard and had to cover her mouth to conceal an irrepressible giggle. Unknown to her, Sikander had noticed but hadn’t let on—preserving his own dignity as much as anything else. He was in no hurry to let his embarrassment grant her the [badal](#) from the handkerchief incident that she had still to exact.

Abdul Latif consulted with the [jirga](#) who resisted any evacuation unless the lookouts had a confirmed sighting of the enemy’s helicopters. Abdul Rahman suggested that from that point forward, he and Sikander should each carry a Stinger on its sling strap. Saleem, Abdul Majeed, and Ejaz would carry replacement missile rounds. BCUs would be at the ready in improvised bags strapped around each of their waists. The arrangement allowed for five firings in short order. Abdul Rahman couldn’t imagine the enemy dedicating five helicopters to the attack. Even if there were more, the remaining pilots would surely retreat if they saw just one or two of their colleagues dropping so readily at the hands of such a new weapon. Given the Stinger’s four-kilometer effective range, they could engage as soon as the first helicopter was within two kilometers of the village, which would trap an oncoming formation in a killing zone from which escape would be all but impossible.

The following day it rained heavily, having the beneficial effect of removing the haze that had built up over the past few weeks of dry weather. That in turn, made the lookouts’ jobs easier once the rain stopped. It also meant that no helicopters would be attacking just yet.

The day after the rains was spectacularly sunny and clear, quickly drying out the ubiquitous mud from the previous day. Many villagers had just re-awakened after their usual post-[fajr](#) sleep. At around half past nine the lookouts were still at their posts and as the morning shift was just about to take over, there was a shout from one of them.

“*Hinds!*” he proclaimed. “Half a dozen maybe! Can’t be sure. They appear to be headed in this direction, fifteen, maybe twenty kilometers away!”

A messenger hurried to Abdul Latif’s house in less than a minute.

“Start the evacuation!” Abdul Latif ordered. “Sons, get Saleem, Sikander, and Ejaz. After that you know what to do. *Hurry!*” he prodded, as everyone scrambled out of their dwellings.

The two men ran to Noor’s house. Quickly, they stirred the other three, and the five of them bolted with weapons slung over their backs toward a cluster of mud-brick homes downhill from their present location. Villagers noisily rushed past them in the opposite direction. Sikander tapped Abdul Rahman’s shoulder as he pointed to the top of one of the taller homes with three floors. Abdul Rahman nodded in agreement. In short order, they slipped into the house, climbed the steep mud-brick steps, and reached the roof.

“Sikander, you and I should stand together here,” ordered Abdul Rahman. “When both missiles have gone, Ejaz will pass you his replacement, and I’ll get mine from Abdul Majeed.” Turning to Ejaz and Abdul Majeed he directed each of them to prepare ready rounds.

“Saleem, you stand in between us,” continued Abdul Rahman. “You’ll need to do targeting for both of us. Sikander, I’ll fire first, but at the second helicopter. The lead pilot won’t be able to see any more than the missile trail and it’ll surprise him. You take the lead pilot with your missile and then we’ll attack whoever comes closest. May Allah remind those [haraamzadas](#) of their cowardice when we destroy one of them!”

And their stupidity when we’ve taken four! Sikander prayed silently.

In reality with the targets being slow, poorly maneuvering helicopters, neither Saleem, as gunner lookout, nor the missile itself would be challenged to deal with any evasive action. However the men’s highly polished routine offered a reflection of the training that was drilled into them, and was now guiding Abdul Rahman. Sikander glimpsed in the man some of Abdul Latif’s style as he busied himself preparing for the attack.

Four heavily armed Hinds in line astern formation and one on each flank, making an overall diamond pattern, barreled in toward the fields outlying Laghar Juy and a few nearby villages. By now the lead helicopter was less than two kilometers away with the next one about fifty meters further back and slightly lower. The remaining two in the line astern formation were likewise separated both vertically and horizontally. From the onlookers’ perspective, their approach exposed the left side of the entire formation to them, as it headed for the fields to the right.

Abdul Rahman and Sikander screwed in their BCUs, and shouldered their weapons. “Now!” Abdul Rahman commanded. Both men tracked their designated targets. Abdul Rahman pressed his impulse generator switch and immediately the BCU’s chemical charge and electrical power sprang into action. He now had a little less than a minute before the BCU would run out of power and IR sensor coolant.

Once the system locked on target, all that the gunner needed was to squeeze the trigger. About six seconds into the startup sequence, Abdul

Rahman's IR sensor emitted the tone indicating a lock. In English, he instinctively shouted, "Weapons free!" and pressed the uncage button followed by the firing trigger.

Agog with amazement, Abdul Majeed and Ejaz, having never witnessed a launch, looked on as the rear cover burst open and the blast from the launch motor hurled the Stinger forward, shattering the IR window. The missile continued trailing the attached lanyard until it was taut then broke free. The rocket's boost-sustain motor ignited on cue from the detaching lanyard, startling both men a second time. Trailing a long arc of smoke, the missile closed in on the target helicopter. About a second before impact, its internal guidance switched over from its heat-seeking IR mode to its target adaptive guidance circuit, modifying its trajectory away from the engines as heat source, toward the main body of the helicopter. The missile exploded on impact, destroying the second helicopter.

Sikander had already made it past the BCU impulse generator switch, spun up the electronics, and, as the first missile exploded, he pressed the uncage button and then the firing trigger. The same launch sequence ensued.

The weapon's deadly contents dutifully pursued the lead helicopter. Having caught the previous oncoming missile from the corner of his eye, its pilot had already banked sharply to his left to steer away from the village fields, but as Abdul Rahman had correctly anticipated, they were too far into the killing range of the missiles for any maneuvering to allow escape from subsequent salvos. Struck from the rear by Sikander's missile, his target was destroyed, killing the three-man crew. The third helicopter, sustained some damage from the blast debris of the one in front, and its pilot also began banking sharply left to avoid being the next victim.

Abdul Rahman had meanwhile loaded and latched in a third missile round handed to him by Abdul Majeed, while Ejaz passed his round to Sikander. Again Abdul Rahman fired. His missile sped swiftly in a leftward arc to meet and exterminate the rightmost helicopter in the formation. In vain, its pilot had decided to bank to his right, away from the explosion in the middle of the formation.

Sikander was about to hit his impulse switch once more, but as it became clear to the Afghan pilots that with a three out of three hit rate, it would be unwise to take on this new weapon, they abandoned the run at the village. He held off from depressing the impulse switch and unshouldered his weapon, saving the BCU in the process. Conserving these valuable missiles was clearly important and it would be better to wait for the next threat than needlessly to destroy another helicopter.

As he lowered the weapon, he was overwhelmed by a great sense of accomplishment, then awe—and then, a new sensation engulfed him. It was terror, and it was like none he could recall.

The best he could do at that moment was to join in the chorus of "[Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!](#)" that had begun rising behind him from among the rapidly returning villagers below and was now also being uttered by his four companions on the rooftop. Even as he shouted the words, he felt strangely detached from the scene. As if stepping out of himself to see himself, his mind settled on the terrible fact that this time he had actually killed people. How could that be? Just weeks ago he'd been a Shakespeare-reading student at University Public School. How could it be?

Why the school comparison bubbled up so vividly in his mind he couldn't say. He couldn't even dedicate the attention needed to pose such a question consciously to himself. His connection with the human race had been severed. The eerily slow-motion inhumanity that seemed to permeate him right now had its antipode in his most human self-image as a student in Peshawar. Consciously, he could only marvel in horror. It wasn't the same as watching his friends attacking in Batawul or being with Abdul Latif improvising with an [RPG](#). This time *he* had pulled the trigger and now a few millimeters of index finger movement had changed who he was. Forever.

Something inside Sikander snapped him out of this terrifyingly lucid moment. Perhaps it was the rousing sounds from the approaching villagers or maybe an inbuilt mechanism to avoid the insanity with which he felt he was flirting. Either way it didn't matter because by now the villagers had surrounded the house and were cheering the five young men on the rooftop. He had to join in as he and his fellow gunners gingerly descended the stairway to be greeted by everyone. The villagers had been saved from attack. *They had been saved from attack.* Sikander could only acknowledge this surreal, but cruelly simple transaction. *The villagers and fields had to be saved. The helicopter crews had to die.* He clung to the logic. Nothing else was available to save his soul from drowning.

Slowly, he began catching up with the scene, re-entering his own body. Just then, his eye caught Abdul Latif standing in the milling crowd. A rock at a turbulent seashore, he stood motionless, delivering Sikander an empathetic stare. The stare threw out a line to Sikander, as if to say, *Yes, I know. Now you understand. Now you're one of us. Not just a [mujahid](#), but one of that tiny fraction of human beings who have ever lived that have also willfully slain another person. A community you can never leave.*

As if to recognize the young man's need, a warm smile joined the stare. Brandishing his [AK-47](#), Abdul Latif repeatedly cried out, "[Allahu Akbar!](#)" his gaze never shifting from Sikander. It drew the youth toward him, as if he might find some reassurance that it was okay; that he was indeed still human, despite his terrible sense of irreversible transformation. He desperately wanted to belong. To something. To someone.

When Sikander finally approached Abdul Latif, the man grabbed him around the waist, and lifted him in an enormous bear hug. He did the same to the others and they to each other. The elation was not simply for the downing of three helicopters, though it certainly merited such celebration. It was for what the day's events represented for the future of the war.

At last, Sikander felt himself experience some semblance of normality. When the hubbub died down and the villagers felt it was safe to return to their homes, Abdul Latif called out to Sikander.

"Sikander! Just remember—the second time's the hardest!" Sikander needed no further clarification, understanding perfectly that Abdul Latif was referring to the hesitation his first experience of killing would confer upon his next.

The families, along with Tahir, converged on Abdul Latif's home. "That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!" Tahir exclaimed. "Did you see how those missiles just...just turned? It was...it was like the helicopters were pulling them in...like they were fish on a line. Amazing!"

"Indeed it was," remarked Abdul Latif. "And, [mashAllah](#), did you see how my boys performed?" he countered. He was proud and impressed with their quick thinking but especially with Abdul Rahman's tactics to maximize confusion among the pilots and make them easier to attack.

"Brother Tahir, go now and return to your village. Make sure that everyone hears of what happened and spread the word. We need to lift the spirits of our [mujahideen](#) brothers!"

"On this day I'm delighted to be the messenger," cried Tahir. His eyes were red and welling up. Packing his horse, he hastened toward Anarbagh, determined to be the first to bring word of the rout of the helicopter force.

That evening, Razya invited Noor and her family to come to dinner to celebrate the victory. When the family members arrived, they were welcomed and asked to sit around the [durree](#).

"This *was* a great day, Brother Abdul Latif," Noor remarked. "Those weapons...they behaved as if they were alive, didn't they? Abdus Sami would have been proud, seeing what his sons and nephews did. We were all amazed. Simply amazed!"

Sikander glanced at Rabia with a newfound confidence. As his eyes met hers, they communicated that no longer could she treat the practice sessions as “childish.” Along with this sentiment was a look of expectant redemption. Surely she could not continue holding his earlier misdemeanor over him after such a contribution to the village’s wellbeing? With a single glance, Rabia almost pouted, allowing a barely perceptible, grudging smile. Sikander’s earnestness in training had perhaps been valuable after all, and it was possibly time for her forgiveness to be unreservedly complete. Sikander returned the glance with the mere flicker of a knowing smile. She cast down her eyes, embarrassed at being so accurately interpreted, and in her usual but attractive way drew her [dupattha](#) forward, hiding a little more of her face with its overhang, than usual.

Abdul Latif advised the village elders to continue round-the-clock watches, though he knew the [DRA](#) forces and probably the Soviets would be re-evaluating their strategy. Helicopter gunships had, for so many years, acted with impunity and kept the [mujahideen](#) at bay. Their virtual invincibility had forced the [mujahideen](#) to dedicate more attention to protecting their loved ones, tending to their wounds, or repairing their fields, than to retaliation. But now that the Stinger was available, the helicopters’ advantage seemed finally to be neutralized and the tide of this conflict had turned decisively.

As the winter drew on, the skirmishes wound down as usual, but a newfound caution also informed Soviet and [DRA](#) decisions. In the relative lull, the [mujahideen](#) forces likewise regrouped, determining how best to leverage the new balance of power. Word had arrived that the Americans had supplied three hundred Stingers as well as several of the French antitank Milan-2 wire-guided missiles. Better still, hundreds more weapons were on their way. The results that Laghar Juy had experienced were being felt more widely around the country as increasing numbers of weapons-trained [mujahideen](#) were returning to the fight and spreading their knowledge to their fellow fighters.

As the weather improved, the skirmishes began once again, but facing the Stinger for air defense and the even simpler Milan-2 against their tanks, the Soviets’ initiatives in 1987 were more circumscribed than in any year previously. A fragile, implicitly understood peace was in place and it seemed like the ideal time to be getting Ejaz married to Hinna.

By the end of April, all preparations for the wedding were complete and the time had come for the small wedding party representing the groom and his family to travel to Yaqub’s village in Pakistan. The weather had been dry and clear for most of the month, making the mountain passes readily traversable. It would take barely a day and a half to get to the bride’s village.

Traveling with the groom were Noor, Saleem, Sikander, and Rabia together with Abdul Latif, Razya, and Abdul Majeed. Abdul Rahman remained behind in the village to take charge of air defense with the several other [mujahideen](#) who were now able to operate the Stinger.

Rabia was filled with anticipation about seeing her sister-in-law-to-be. From time to time, she would strike up conversation with Sikander, always, of course, under the watchful eye of either Noor or Razya. As they were leaving the large open plain before entering Yaqub’s village, Rabia became even more excited. Sikander decided to tease her about it.

“So why suddenly all the chatter, Rabia?”

Rabia displayed her trademark insulted look.

“Why not? We don’t all need to be silent brooders, like you’ve been lately,” she countered. Indeed, Sikander had become more withdrawn and pensive with the lingering effects of having killed the helicopter crew.

“Rabia, when your new sister-in-law’s back home with you, it’ll be fun to watch you drive her insane.”

“Sikannnder!” interjected Noor. “Rabia’s naturally excited by the wedding and looking forward to meeting Hinna,” she declared, before muttering, “as am I,” while casting a glance at Abdul Latif and Ejaz, each of whom carefully failed to notice. Rabia meanwhile, with the studied appearance of indignation, was more than happy to have her mother defend her.

“Rabia,” offered Sikander wearily, “Please. Continue.”

“Well,” she remarked, in an annoying tone of victory, “I was going to talk about this scenery of ours and Scotland and ask you which was more beautiful. Doesn’t matter now.”

“Rabia,” chided Noor, “don’t continue with that tone, or you might as well be quiet and let us all get a moment of peace.”

Sikander quickly came to Rabia’s aid. “No, no, it’s all right. Actually, I don’t mind answering that.

“Rabia, it seems to me, each place, each thing...well, it has its own beauty and there isn’t really a single kind. Is there?”

“Hm...sounds like it could be true, Sikander, but what exactly do you mean?”

“Look, these mountains, they’re...magnificent. But what I found in Scotland was a less intense yet somehow more appealing beauty.”

“Less intense? More appealing?” Rabia looked puzzled.

“I don’t know, maybe it was just the tranquility of being among people at peace that was affecting the way I saw it.”

Realization of the inherent truth in his words followed their utterance. Being at war *had* taken something away from the beautiful places through which they were passing. With beauty in the eye of the beholder—another of Mr. Aftab’s favored aphorisms—these beholders, himself included, couldn’t truly see what was there while struggling to have the eyes that only a country at peace could offer them. His contemplative expression prompted a simple “Hmm,” from Rabia as she closed the subject and rode along for a few more minutes before resuming her chatter.

The entourage finally arrived at the village that Hinna had until now called home and were received with all due ceremony. Customarily, gifts of clothing and jewelry, were exchanged before the travelers were put up at the same home in which Abdul Latif and his boys had spent the night on their first visit to Yaqub’s in August.

The night before the ceremony, Hinna’s friends set to work decorating her hands and feet with beautiful [henna](#) dye patterns amid singing and [attan](#) dances, while Razya and Noor busied themselves making final adjustments to Hinna’s [lehenga](#) suit. The following day, with Hinna adorned in the bridal outfit embroidered with rich floral patterns in sequins and gold threads, the wedding was finally upon them. Studying Hinna, Rabia felt a stirring. Decked out in the bridal outfit, she was naturally a beautiful young lady. *Hinna’s plainly doing it more justice than I did.* Her thoughts drifted to a time in the future when such an experience might also be hers to relish.

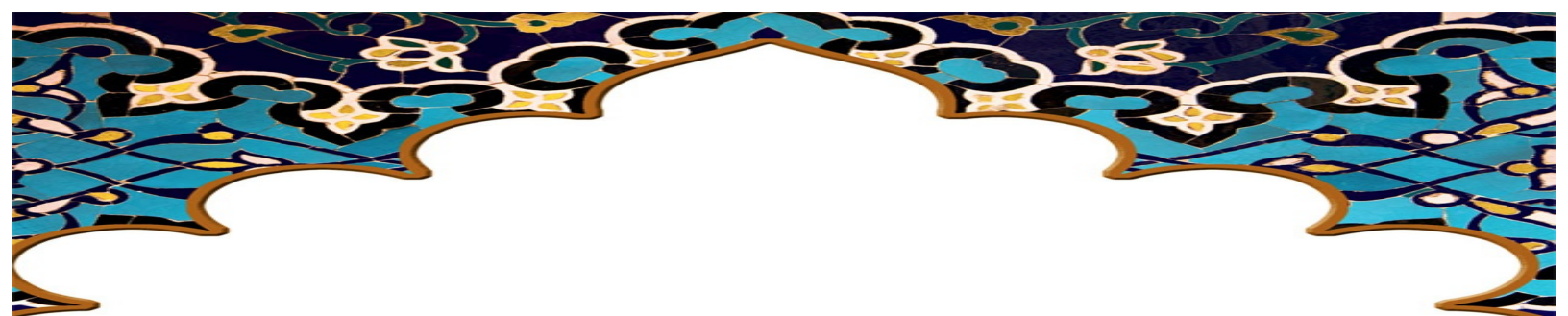
The [qazi](#) asked the bride three times to confirm her acceptance of the groom and the amount and manner of payment of the [mehr](#) due to her, following which she signed the papers, as did her “advocate,” in this case Yaqub, along with Abdul Latif, as witness representing the groom. Marching the two men to a separate room where the groom awaited them, the [qazi](#) asked him, also three times, for his acceptance of the bride and of his obligation to pay the fifty thousand rupee [mehr](#). All were relieved when the groom affirmed and made his mark upon the appropriate papers.

Declaring the [nikah](#) complete, the [qazi](#) offered an open supplication. With the formalities thus concluded, the rest of the day was left to more singing, [attans](#), and food. Sikander was fascinated by the oddly incongruent merriment set against the war and destruction that was taking place in these times. These were people willing to defy their circumstances by daring to enjoy the occasion, and their defiance made him admire them all the more for it.

After staying in the village for two days, it was time to take the new bride to her permanent home and family in Laghar Juy. Tearful parting [salaams](#)

took place. Hinna cried on Shahnaz's shoulder, then Yaqub's and junior mother Yasmeen's. She finally hugged Aurangzeb, Nadeem, and Sohail, before being led by Ejaz to join the rest of the travelers waiting to set off for Laghar Juy. With the lull in fighting, the journey back was uneventful.

After reaching Laghar Juy, the groom's extended family and local guests were invited to participate in the second half of the ceremony, the [walimah](#). Although it was normally the responsibility of the groom's family, with Noor a widow, the [walimah](#) arrangements were left to Abdul Latif and Razya to organize. Noor was happy to have another young woman about the house and at a rapidly maturing nineteen, Hinna was ideal. Sikander meanwhile looked forward to knowing Hinna better and to her shouldering some of the burden of meeting Rabia's insatiable intellectual appetite.



Chapter 8

Arghandab

IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN the [mujahideen](#) maintained well-fortified positions up and down the Arghandab Valley, west of Qandahar. From time to time they sought opportunities to mount an offensive to capture the city. Early in 1987, they had made such a push, first by striking at Soviet and Afghan State Security Ministry positions as a diversion, then hitting three outposts defended by government-friendly militias. Although the city didn't fall, all three suffered at the hands of the [mujahideen](#).

Having almost succeeded, the attack worried the government immensely. Removal of the [mujahideen](#) from Arghandab became a priority. By early April, aware of preparations against them, the [mujahideen](#) up and down the valley appealed for reinforcements. Among those asked was the inimitable Jalaluddin Haqqani.

In May, the middle of the fasting month of [Ramadhan](#), Jalaluddin visited Laghar Juy. The village was by then well supplied with Stingers and Milan-2s. Haqqani brought word to Abdul Latif that Younus Khalis was anxious to support the defense of Arghandab as a government counter-offensive appeared increasingly likely.

"We have word that the Jamiat-e-Islami and the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, have their militias in the Qandahar area along with our own Brother Younus's HIK. Lala Malang is our commander there and needs more fighters."

"What do you have in mind, Brother Jalal?" Abdul Latif asked.

"I can think of few better than you to lead a group from this area." Haqqani responded.

"I can go," said Abdul Latif. "However, we'd be wise to leave our existing weapons here in the villages, along with a defensive contingent. That way, we can travel light and quickly across the mountains to Peshawar, obtain new weapons from the [ISI](#), and truck down to Quetta to re-enter Afghanistan near Spin Boldak. From there, Qandahar can be approached from whatever direction makes sense."

"Agreed. The [ISI](#) won't have a problem furnishing fresh weapons; they're arriving in large quantities now. They should also be able to get our people into Quetta, and have the weapons flown to the local PAF base. The details can be worked out, but please get as many men together as you can. How many do you think that'll be?"

"Thirty." Abdul Latif shrugged. "Perhaps more. Morale *has* improved since we got the new weapons."

"How long do you need?"

"Three or four days, but give me five and whatever I can put together I will. What about mules?"

"We can arrange them. How many do you need?"

"An additional thirty. They can be distributed to the outlying villages. We'll have no cargo, so our men can ride them through Takhto [Kalay](#) into Pakistan however they're able. Once we're at the staging point, we'll organize groups to get across to Jamrud by vehicle."

"Very well. It's settled," said Jalaluddin. "I'll make my own appeals in the local villages and ask those people to contact you about getting to Peshawar. Meanwhile I'll coordinate with the [ISI](#). [InshaAllah](#), this year could be decisive!"

With his business concluded, Jalaluddin bid [salaam](#) to Abdul Latif, hastily leaving Laghar Juy to do as he had promised. That same night after the [iftar](#) and completing [isha](#), Abdul Latif asked his sons and Saleem to make the appeal for a handful of other [mujahideen](#) to go out to trusted people in the nearby villages, organize multiple bands to gather up at Takhto [Kalay](#), and wait for Abdul Latif and his band, who would be the last to arrive.

Given the Stinger training that had by now been widely disseminated, each village sending volunteers to the campaign was to keep a contingent of two Stinger-trained teams if possible. If not, they were to post lookouts and create an evacuation plan in case of attack.

Ejaz had missed out on the Scotland trip and was anxious to participate in the Arghandab campaign. Abdul Latif had no disagreement, but with Ejaz being a newlywed, Hinna would have to be sold on the idea.

Ejaz's mission was to begin in the bedroom. "Hinna, we haven't been married long, and we barely know each other," he began. "But you know, from the moment I first saw you, in your father's home, my heart pounded and ached. Strangely painful it was, each time you left the room. Sweet pain. It was hard to let the moment pass without reacting." Ejaz chuckled nervously. "You cost me that night's sleep, you know, and...and Allah be praised for my uncle! The following morning we were engaged. And...I know it hasn't been long, I...I don't have the words to tell you what you—"

Hinna gently placed her fingers over Ejaz's mouth. "Ejaz. My love," she interrupted as she lowered her hand, "When I was told of the proposal, something went through me too. It was as if...as if I was changing inside and I had the same feelings you mention."

Ejaz nodded, continuing his woefully rambling attempt to break the news to her of his likely absence. "So Hinna, it's uh, difficult to imagine being away from you for even a minute. But you know the challenges of these times. We're constantly being forced to fight for what we believe in.

"Hinna, I need to go with my uncle to Qandahar. We're winning this fight and our people outside Qandahar...they're facing a critical—a really critical—threat. We have to go there. We have to help and who knows? Maybe even win this whole war. The Russians seem to be committed to pulling out. This will force them to be serio—"

"You mean...you'll be *leaving* me? *Here*?" interjected Hinna, sounding more disappointed than angry. Ejaz nodded, avoiding her gaze.

Hinna continued to discover her husband. Though she could hardly say she knew him intimately, hers was the kind of love that lacked confusion. His very struggle to break the news to her was a measure of his feelings for her. His eyes found the courage to re-engage with hers and she looked at him with a fascinated curiosity. She wore a sympathetic frown, which quickly turned into a friendly pout, dissolving any remaining resistance.

"You don't need my permission," Hinna said. "Go. By the grace of Allah, go and come back safe and well [inshaAllah](#). And with a victory.

"But for now, will you come? Closer? Hold me."

Ejaz obeyed, and as she laid her head against his chest, a tear rolled down her cheek. His eyes found hers once more. Seeing their wetness, he kissed her lips softly, his mission accomplished. She responded in kind, but with the full measure of her loving spirit as the couple, now a single being, melted slowly onto its bed.

Saleem, Abdul Rahman, and Abdul Majeed spread the word among their contacts while Sikander stayed behind with Abdul Latif and Razya. After four days, the task of gathering [mujahideen](#) was complete and each small band made its way discreetly out of its own village toward Takhto [Kalay](#).

The time finally came for Abdul Latif's own party to bid farewell to their women and, much to their disappointment, Abdul Rahman and Saleem, who could not be spared for this expedition. They were a proven team with the Stingers and were needed at home. Hinna, for all her seeming fortitude when learning of the mission and Ejaz's impending absence, finally broke down and wept silently as the men set off. Standing between Noor and Rabia, she leaned on Noor's shoulder, wrapping an arm firmly around Rabia.

Having braced herself for her brother's departure, Rabia thus far held herself together. But now, there was a new, unfamiliar sensation to which she could not give a name, and for which she wasn't prepared. It was a wrenching feeling that seemed to connect inexplicably with Sikander's parting. She

too became tearful. Raza meanwhile, her eyes closed in whispered prayer, was too focused to weep. Abdul Latif and his companions continued into the distance and up the slopes to the southeast of Laghar Jui until they were eventually lost against the backdrop of the [Spin Ghar](#).

After reaching Takhto, they were met by thirty-three [mujahideen](#) who had arrived two and three at a time. They were put up for the night in different homes with Abdul Latif and his immediate family bunking at Azam's. Over the following four days, in bands of seven or eight, they made their way across the mountains to the Torkhum Road outside Peshawar. The mules were returned to Takhto by other [mujahideen](#) who were still ferrying weapons into Afghanistan, and this relay process went on until everyone was in Pakistan. As each band arrived, they were taken to Arif's place, rested, and if not fasting then fed, before being driven to Peshawar's PAF base and housed in barracks designated for the [ISI](#).

On the fourth day, Abdul Latif took his own men across. When they arrived at Arif's he welcomed them in his usual ebullient fashion.

"[Allahu Akbar](#)! Abdul Latif, welcome friend! Welcome all of you!"

Greetings out of the way, Arif launched into a description of the plan. "We have a transport coming later today for you. The good news, as I've explained to the other groups, is that instead of going by truck, Six Squadron will be flying you with your weapons directly out of Peshawar."

"And when we get to Quetta?" asked a pleasantly surprised Abdul Latif.

"Not Quetta. You're being flown into Pishin. The Hercules can make it in, especially with less than forty of you. Junaid's already there and he's waiting to get you all to the border."

"Pishin? How far is that from the border?"

"Closer than Quetta, actually. After you land, at around midnight you'll be trucked down to Yaru Karez and from there the road leads all the way to Chaman at the Afghan border. But you'll be leaving the road before then. You'll be staying at several homes in a small village about two kilometers from the northern end of the Khojak tunnel. We've friends at that village. They'll meet you and help."

"Mules?" asked Abdul Latif.

"They'll already be there, but by then you will have crossed the most difficult terrain. Pack the mules with your weapons and go north out from the village keeping the Toba Kakar Mountains to your east. After twelve kilometers, head west to Spin Boldak where you'll meet up with local [mujahideen](#)."

"Spin Boldak is under our control?" Abdul Latif was a little surprised.

"Control? Huh! Who can say that these days? But we do have strong [mujahideen](#) presence and if I'm right you'll be able to rest there. However, if for any reason Spin Boldak seems risky, you'll need to continue north following the mountains for another forty kilometers before heading west until you enter the Arghandab Valley to the northwest of Qandahar. Be sure to come around to the west of the valley from north of the Dahla Dam and its lake. The Soviets and [DRA](#) have the eastern side of the valley to themselves."

"I see. Anything else?"

"No, I think we've covered everything."

Having gone over the details, with his signature grin Arif turned to Sikander: "Telephone's working. Would you like to—"

"Oh yes... Yes, I would. [JazaakAllah](#)!" Sikander answered, as if he'd been holding his breath for the moment.

"Please—" Arif motioned to the stairs, "but remember to limit your conversation to family matters," he warned.

Leaving home all those months earlier, Sikander had started this journey in his life by being indiscreet. Few people could advise him now, better than he could himself, not to make such a mistake again. He made his way to the living room. It was four in the afternoon on a Friday. He supposed his mother would probably be at home preparing [iftar](#). It was a warm, comforting thought that helped him rehearse all the things he wanted to say to her. Most prominent among them was that he loved his family, that now in a real sense, he understood the meaning and value of a family. It was an understanding his previously sheltered existence had largely denied him. He also thought about the several written messages he had already sent and was concerned to avoid repeating himself, as time was precious.

It took four attempts before his call connected and the phone rang, once...twice...

"Hello?" said a female voice. His mother. "Hello?" she said again.

"[Ammee](#)? It's me. It's Sikander." He paused. Like so many birds, his rehearsed thoughts fluttered out of the open cage of his mind.

"Sikander!" Sofie exclaimed. "Oh, [beththa](#), where *are* you? Are you in Pakistan?" she managed to get at least these questions out before beginning to lose her poise.

"[Ammee](#)... [Ammee](#)-jan," Sikander responded, trying hard to keep himself together. "Yes, I'm in Pakistan. I'm all right. [Ammee](#), I love you. I miss you so...How is everyone? You know, we're doing important work here and it's making a difference. I can't say any more but I've—"

"Sikander [beththa](#), are you eating properly? Are you well? Not sick? Can we...can we see you?" Sofie's tone was subdued. She understood that entreaties would be ineffective.

"[Ammee](#)-jan, I can't tell you how much I want to see everyone. I have so much I want to share, and I will. I promise. When I'm back... I promise."

"[Beththa](#), we received your notes but had no way to reply," continued Sofie. "Can we at least speak with you more often?"

"[Ammee](#), where I live there aren't any phones and whenever I get the chance I get a letter to you, but that hasn't happened for several months. I wish I were home! How's [Abba](#)? Is he still angry with me?"

"Who can remain angry for so long, [beththa](#)? Yes, he was very disappointed at first. You abandoned him. Then after we started hearing from you and understood what you were doing, he was more at ease—[beththa](#), he's walking in right now. Javed? Javed, hurry, it's Sikander! Here [beththa](#), speak to him."

Sikander's heart skipped a beat as he steeled himself for a potentially difficult conversation. There was a moment of silence before his father picked up the phone.

"Sikander!" said his father. "[Beththa](#)... How are you? Where are you calling from?"

Sikander was wholly unprepared for Javed's humble tone. Having braced for a paternal tirade, he had no defense against the vulnerability in his father's voice.

Sikander cried. His straining to hold back tears left him speechless.

"[Beththa](#), we...we're all well here. Look, I was...I shouldn't have driven you away like that but sometimes, well, sometimes Allah works in his own way, and when he does, who are we to oppose it? Sikander?"

"I'm here. I'm here. [Abba](#), I miss you. Forgive me, [Abba](#). It wasn't the right way to leave. But I'm...I hope you'll be proud of what I'm doing." Sikander clung to coherence by the weakest of threads.

"[Beththa](#)," said Javed, "if it's worth anything, I wish I were with you. Every day, I pray Allah gives you the strength to prevail and come home. Just stay in touch and don't worry about us. [Alhamdulillah](#), we've been getting back on our feet with some good government work at the refugee camp—well,

let's just say we're fine."

To Sikander, Javed was a transformed person and it made him reflect upon how transformed he himself might now have seemed to his father.

"Sikander!" Arif called from downstairs.

"[Abba](#)-jee, I have to go. The others are calling for me. Please look after yourself and don't worry about me. I'll call or write again as soon as I can.

And oh, [Ramadhan Mubarak!](#) [Allah Hafiz!](#)"

"[Ramadhan Mubarak!](#) [Allah Hafiz!](#)" echoed Javed, hurriedly wiping at a threatening tear.

"Sikander!" Arif repeated.

"Coming!"

With heavy footfalls, Sikander descended the steps to the war-room and rejoined his seated friends. They studied the map that had been the basis of the most recent discussion with Abdul Latif. With the route understood, everyone participated in a combined [zuhr](#) and [asr](#) prayer, and a few minutes later a small truck appeared outside Arif's house. The men boarded it with their lightly packed belongings and were soon on their way to Peshawar airport's PAF base. It wasn't hard to prepare for travel as the men had only their rifles, some ammunition, and a meager sack of personal items, mostly clothing.

Once all the [mujahideen](#) were together at the air base, food packages were handed out for [iftar](#) in readiness for the sunset, which would take place during their flight. The sky was already a dusky orange as the men were led out of the barracks toward the aircraft. They marched two abreast into the gaping rear of the C130. Contrary to Sikander's previous experiences, this plane had a rack in the middle holding several Stinger missile cases, dozens of Milan-2s, and six Milan launcher posts.

Sikander felt a little superior at having been aboard such an aircraft before and he fussed over his fellow travelers, especially Abdul Latif, showing him how to strap in and put on the ear protectors. As his mentor observed Sikander, *I know what you're doing*, spoke his eyes.

The aircraft droned aloft into the evening sky, turning due south and continuing for forty minutes before making a straight run southwest for Pishin. A couple of hours later it touched down at around ten in the evening on Pishin's runway 24. The reversed pitch on each of the its four propellers arrested the giant bird in short order. When the ramp door opened, hot, dry air greeted the travelers as they emerged.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum!](#)" came a voice. Everyone instinctively gave the customary reply. Abdul Latif, who had been minding his step while leaving the cargo bay, lifted his eyes the moment he recognized the voice.

"Hey! Troublemaker! Haven't seen you in months. How *are* you?"

"Abdul Latif! Welcome back, brother! It's been a while!" Junaid exclaimed as the men hugged each other. Abdul Majeed, Ejaz, and Sikander followed suit. "You boys... Made quite the name for yourselves, eh? People still speak of those three helicopters, you know."

"Really?" asked Sikander, genuinely surprised. "Let's hope we can make a difference in Qandahar."

"It's why we're all here!" declared Junaid. "Anyhow, we have time to talk on the road. We've a good distance to cover. About fifty kilometers in these mountains tonight."

The men piled into two trucks accompanied by some of their weapons, with the remaining weapons in a third truck. The convoy trundled down the rough road out of the airfield and headed south to Yaru Karez. The village was little more than a road junction at which they turned right heading northwest toward the mountains and Chaman.

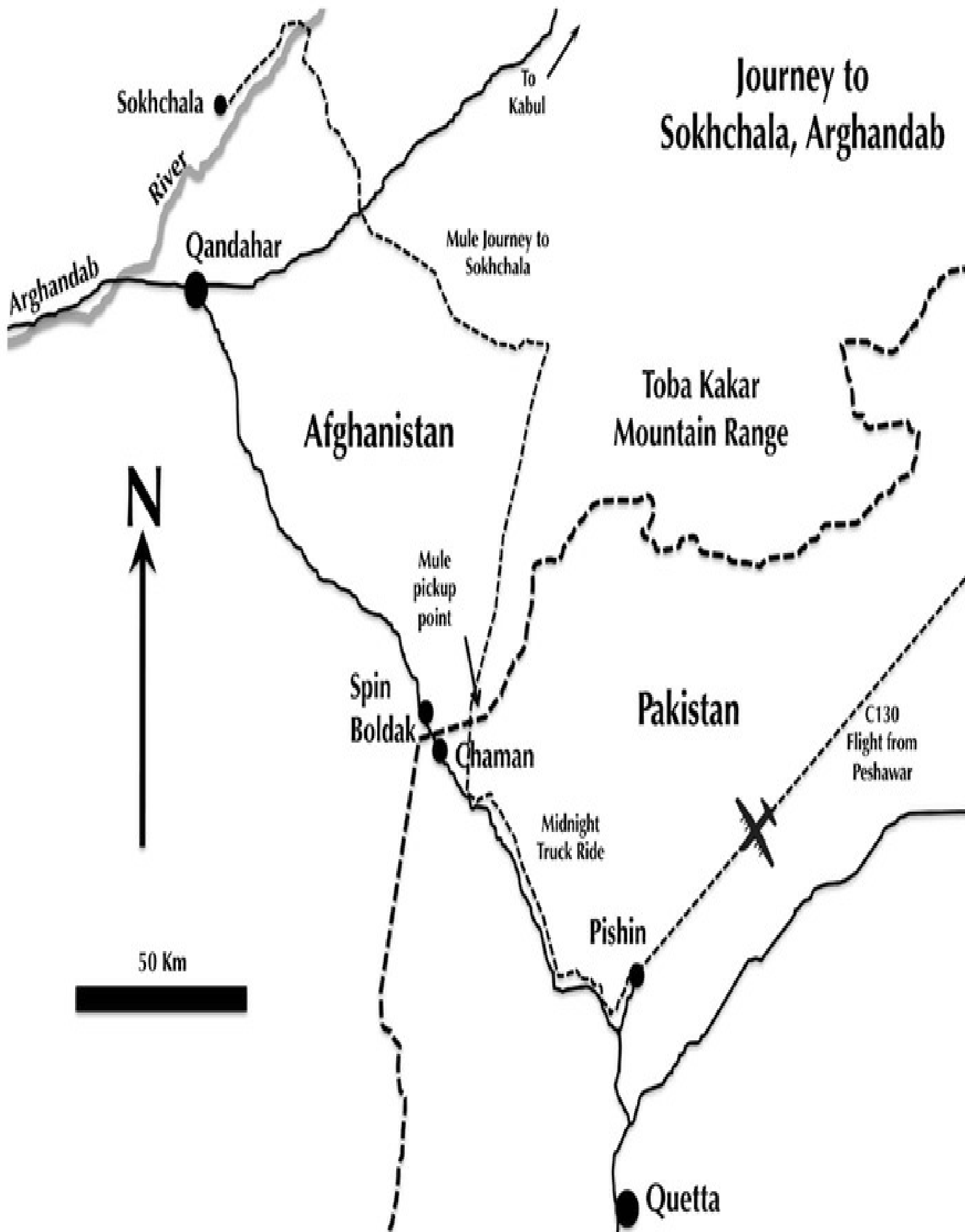
The truck ride was a terrifying experience, permitting nothing resembling conversation. There was no visibility except for the occasional moonlit view into the valleys and sheer drops outside through the split in the canvas back flaps. Every time the truck made sharp veering maneuvers these normally courageous warriors were gripped by the fear of losing their lives to a moment of driver carelessness. To their immense relief, having crossed the worst of the mountains, the trucks finally came to a rest, though well before reaching the border.

As soon as the engines were silenced, the back flaps were opened up and everyone eagerly stepped out. Having seen the trucks approaching from a distance, the local village tribesmen were ready with their mules; twenty-eight in all.

The [mujahideen](#) hurriedly emptied the trucks of their remaining cargo and set about arranging groups of weapons that could be loaded on the mules in the morning. Meanwhile, the villagers had already prepared their homes to put up the travelers for what was left of the night.

At dawn, after taking [suhur](#) to begin the day's fasting, followed by the [fajr](#) prayer, the mule packing began in earnest. Sixteen Stinger weapon systems and eight missile rounds were bundled onto twelve of the mules, with one case on each side to maintain balance. Five mules were used to carry six Milans on each side and one launch post, with one of the mules carrying an extra launch post. Seven mules were packed with the men's belongings and ammunition. Four more animals were kept in reserve in case of injury. The seven mule teams were organized in bands of four to six [mujahideen](#) according to how the corresponding personnel and ammunition packs had been distributed. In that way, each team of mules had at least one personnel pack animal and three weapons pack animals, forming a self-contained weapons-equipped team. [AK-47s](#) were to be shoulder carried.

Journey to Sokhchala, Arghandab



Before departing, the men huddled in an open courtyard, partially shaded by the wall of one of the houses.

“Spin Boldak?” asked Abdul Latif.

Junaid shook his head, “Too dangerous. From what the CIA tell us, it looks as if government forces might attack it from the south or west any day now. Straight to Arghandab, I’m afraid.”

“In that case, we’ve no time to lose,” responded Abdul Latif.

The plan was for the [mujahideen](#) to proceed in small groups at one-hour intervals and fan out with each troop in a slightly different but generally northerly direction. They were then to turn west through some relatively easy country for a further fifty kilometers until reaching the main Kabul-to-Qandahar highway. Under cover of darkness, they would have to cross the road and proceed, as discussed in Jamrud, toward the west side of the Arghandab Valley. It would be a simple matter to hike the few kilometers following the west bank of the river before arriving at Sokhchala, their rendezvous point with Lala Malang and his forces.

Abdul Latif kept Abdul Majeed, Ejaz, and Sikander with him and the four of them took the lead team. He also took one spare mule to ride, which would be taken in turns on the long walk. Making a reasonable four kilometers an hour, they arrived at their first rest point in the early evening and after a simple but much needed [iftar](#) made ready to sleep in the open by the banks of a small brook coming out of the mountains. Being travelers, the fasting of [Ramadhan](#) wasn’t obligatory and the men decided to avoid fasting for the rest of the journey, as dehydration was a real threat. The night was bearably cool under the clear sky. Sikander, who hadn’t said much during the day, was in the mood for talking. He was lying next to Ejaz.

“Ejaz? You awake?”

“Mmhmm,” Ejaz let out a tired murmur.

“Ejaz, remember when we first met Yaqub and his family?”

“Of course. Why?”

“And I don’t suppose you remember how—smitten?—you became that night?” asked Sikander. “Hinna had quite the effect on you, didn’t she?”

“Mmm...you know I recall *that*, Sikander,” sighed Ejaz, becoming slightly more attentive.

“What was it like exactly? What did you feel?”

“Hard to describe, really. I suppose it felt like an ache in my heart and stomach. Not like any ordinary aching, mind you. It was as if I’d have to suffer this until I saw her again, and that somehow seeing her would fix it, yet it felt strangely—good. To have that pain, I mean. Have you had such an experience?”

“Uh...no,” replied Sikander. “Well, not exactly,” he qualified before elaborating. “I sometimes have this feeling for...well, for Rabia, and you...you felt this way once and came to me asking what to do. How would *you* help me now?”

“Sometimes?” asked Ejaz. “Why only sometimes?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s because when I want to talk to her...huh...always with someone else there of course...it usually turns into an argument. But then, I guess, I feel like her battling me in that way makes me feel more—attracted to her? Does that make sense?”

Ejaz emitted a muted chuckle. “You want to find sense in how you feel about a girl? But if you do feel this way, we should talk again. What brought this up now?”

“Oh, just lying here I suppose, under the open sky, seeing the stars. I was reminded of when you met Hinna, and I’d just been having this dream when—Ejaz?”

“Mmmm...”

In the mountain air, they slept a little too well and it was down to Abdul Majeed to wake his companions with the dawn. The mountains to their east made seeing the sunrise impossible and they were far from anything resembling a [masjid](#) to be able to hear an [azaan](#). Absent these cues, he had to shake them vigorously.

The dawn prayer and a short breakfast of rations were quickly completed. Drawing water into their flasks from the brook, they set off to the west as soon as it was light enough. The brook led the way.

After four hours of following it, the brook, now a stream, veered to the southwest. They continued to walk alongside its gentle bend for a couple of kilometers until they came to a dry riverbed leading up the hills to the north and then west. Instructing the men to refill their flasks at the stream, Abdul Latif led them up the riverbed into the hills. As the climb became steeper, they made switchbacks to reach the top, where a small village amounting to no more than a clutch of mud-brick homes was situated. They were warmly received and offered welcome rest and refreshments. A couple of hours later they were on their way again.

Proceeding west from the hills, they descended a switchback trail to the lower elevations of a wide sloping plain stretching all the way to the Tarnak River. Along with the Arghandab, it was one of the two main rivers flowing by Qandahar.

The going wasn’t challenging, though there were a few small streams and many brooks to cross. Eventually, by early evening, they reached the Tarnak. In this area, about fifty kilometers to the northeast of Qandahar, the main Qandahar-Kabul Road ran parallel to it. The men decided to rest just to the east of the river at one of the small clusters of homes where friendly locals would take them in if need be. Everyone from these parts was from the huge Durrani [Pashtun](#) tribe. They were no friends of the communists.

Early the next morning, under a blanket of darkness, the group moved on to cross the major road. Although in disrepair, it was still the only one available to enemy forces to move supplies and arms up and down the country. Every hour or so a convoy passed, so it was important to have an excellent view in both directions before attempting to pull a team of mules across undetected.

Once the crossing was safely made, they continued on to the high ground northeast of Qandahar, and by daybreak were descending into the area north of Dahla Lake. Finally, they were on the west bank of the Arghandab.

The air in the river valley south of the Dahla Dam had a new fragrance. “What *is* that?” asked Sikander.

“Pomegranates,” replied Abdul Latif. “There are tens of thousands of pomegranate trees in this valley. Pity they’re not in season right now. It’s the flowers you’re smelling.”

As they approached the pomegranate orchards and open fields, a small band of armed [mujahideen](#) approached, and quizzed them about who they were and whose militia they belonged to. Though passable, Abdul Latif’s explanations were not nearly as effective as the Stingers and Milans packed on their mules. The troop was allowed to continue into the valley.

“There’ll be six more teams coming through, so be on the lookout for them.” Abdul Latif explained, before he and his companions marched on. Traveling as directed by the guards, it didn’t take long to arrive at Mullah Lala Malang’s headquarters in the leafy settlement of Sokhchala.

Malang had risen to prominence following a skirmish with the Soviets at a place called Deh Khwaja, not far from where he was presently dug in. He had ambushed a Soviet column attempting to resupply their positions in Panjwayee from Qandahar’s air base. That was back in 1982, and his fearsome reputation for handling captured opponents made his name at once terrifying and reviled among Soviet and Afghan government forces. Despite showing little mercy to the enemy and none to traitors, to his [mujahideen](#) brethren he was welcoming and generous.

Abdul Latif had never met him. “[Assalaamu ‘alaykum!](#)” he greeted Mullah Malang after being shown in to see him. “I’m Abdul Latif and I have almost forty [mujahideen](#) with me from Jalaluddin Haqqani’s force out of Nangarhar. We’re here to assist you.”

“[Wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#), Brother Abdul Latif,” Malang responded. “You know, we have another Abdul Latif here. He’s the commander of the [NIFA](#) forces. We should be sure to avoid confusion, don’t you think? Maybe we should call you by a different name?”

Unsure of himself, Abdul Latif elected to be cautious. “Whatever you consider will be helpful in winning this war is acceptable to me,” he replied.

“Hm. It’s not a pressing matter. We’ll get by with your real name,” the commander joked. “So, what have you brought with you?”

“Thirty-three men will be coming in throughout the day with almost thirty mules, twenty-four Stingers with sixteen launchers, and sixty Milans with six launchers, along with our own light arms.”

“Right. Then I suggest you go now and rest. We can go over plans tomorrow when all your men are here and properly rested.”

“As you wish, Brother Malang. I—”

“Abdul Latif, please... It’s Lala.”

“As you wish, Lala. When should we meet tomorrow?”

“At ten. Here.”

Abdul Latif left Lala Malang’s headquarters feeling a little under-appreciated after his trek from the border. When he rejoined his boys outside, one of the [mujahideen](#) guards walked them over to a cluster of connected brick buildings that appeared to have been built for storing harvested pomegranates.

“You’ll be staying here,” he explained and left them. With the mules unpacked, the men moved their weapons and materials into their assigned rooms.

“Well?” Ejaz probed.

“We’re supposed to bunk here and meet him in the morning. I’m tired, so that’s what I’m going to do. I suggest we all do the same.”

Abdul Latif was irritated. Ejaz knew better than to press him to elaborate and everyone settled down to nap after the long trek.

The group awoke after a few hours, well rested. Following a combined [zuhr](#) and [asr](#) prayer, Sikander and Ejaz decided to go for a stroll among the leafy orchards.

“So, Sikander... My sister, eh?” Ejaz laughed. “You know, there was a time when all a man had to do was throw a cloth over the woman he wanted to marry, pay her father an agreed price, and she’d be his.”

“I see. And if the father was no longer alive?”

“Well, *then* it would be the oldest male relative.” Ejaz smirked, casting a sideways glance at Sikander.

Sikander smiled. He would have to wait until Ejaz was in a more serious mood before pursuing the matter of Rabia with him. For now, it would be the air and the scenery and he’d leave it at that.

They returned in time for the sunset and [isha](#) prayers. Overwhelmed by the scent of the place, which, as the night wore on, became even more pronounced, Sikander took a moment to close his eyes, shut out the war, and lose himself in the redolence. Without effort, his thoughts drifted to Rabia. He drifted to sleep.

Morning came. Now that traveling was over, everyone took the usual [suhur](#) meal, made the [niyyah](#) for the day’s fasting, performed the dawn prayer, and napped for a short while, but by ten o’clock, they were at Lala Malang’s command post. Malang seemed in a more jovial mood and welcomed them, inviting Abdul Latif to examine the maps on his table.

“The government has six thousand men located here, here, and here.” Malang gestured to different locations dotting the Qandahar area. “From what we can determine, against us we have units of the Fifteenth Division and the Seventh Tank Brigade near Zhare Dashteh. That’s about six kilometers to our north. They’re supported by the Fourteenth and Seventeenth Divisions and have militias from all over the place, including Kabul. It doesn’t look as if the Soviets are truly committed, but they do have Qandahar air base and units of the Seventieth Motorized Rifles. The [DRA](#) have [APCs](#). Their men, huh! Mostly farm boys these days. Not well trained. I really feel for them.” Malang shook his head, sighing at their prospects.

“The Soviets can’t have forgotten their embarrassment at Deh Khwaja,” remarked Abdul Latif. Malang perked up. He peered across the table at Abdul Latif, meeting his gaze squarely.

“You’ve *heard* of that?” he asked grinning broadly.

“Directly from Jalaluddin Haqqani,” responded Abdul Latif, returning the smile.

Malang held a look of fond reminiscence. “Hm. In any case, I don’t think we’ll be so lucky as to have them totally out of the picture, but you could be right. They certainly don’t feel the same commitment to this fight that the [DRA](#) does. We gave the [DRA](#) a bloody nose at the beginning of this year and almost took Qandahar. Now they’re itching for their [badal](#)! Probably timing an offensive for victory by ‘[Eid](#), a week from now.”

“So, Lala, what’s your plan?” Abdul Latif probed.

“Well, let me ask you what you would do. I’ve heard only good things about your tactics in Nangarhar.”

Abdul Latif studied the map and thought for a moment before answering the unexpected question.

“Brother Lala, I walked around the valley on the way in yesterday. The irrigation ditches are deep. To avoid falling into them, the heavy armor of the enemy will have to follow specific pathways. Meanwhile, we can take deep cover in those same ditches. You also have well camouflaged bunkers where I can set up our Milan missile launch posts and arrange them to crossfire into any arm—”

“Yes, yes, Abdul Latif, but how do you propose to handle a whole division of Soviet tanks? We could be looking at eighty or more. I know they won’t be able to come into the orchard area, and we’ve already been using the channeling tactics you mention, but they’ll try fighting from the edges of this green zone and landing their shells onto us.”

“Well, if the orchards are impassable for the tanks, I imagine they’ll be using the tanks like ships against shore positions. They’ll want to soften up our forces as they move their [APCs](#) to get infantry in among us. We could stay in the bunkers while shelling persists and place just a small force of

lookouts at strategic locations in case the tanks try to break through. It'll force the Soviet tanks to keep a distance or go further down the valley to find their opening."

"All good points, brother. The Afghan army regulars have poor morale and if we can get a high kill rate and block their remaining vehicles, I think they'll either pull back or surrender."

"Yes, I agree that's likely, but as long as we treat their deserters well, they'll desert in great numbers," counseled Abdul Latif.

"What about air defense?" Lala asked.

"Well, they'll no doubt try to pound us with helicopters or attack aircraft along with the tank shelling. In any case, the main point is that I'd expect them to send in their infantry after believing they've softened us up, however they choose to do that. But I think we can repel an air assault with our Stingers."

"How many Stingers did you say you've brought?"

"We have twenty-four, which safely ought to handle at least a dozen aircraft. If the Soviets provide the air cover, either they'll bring up reinforcements or they'll see our success and want to keep their helicopters from harm. But if they come in large numbers, we won't have an answer. Brother Lala, what about the other militias in the area? Aren't we working with them?"

"Mullah Naqib is dug in further down the valley on the west bank at Chaharqulba and [NIFA's](#) Abdul Latif has his force to the north of Pir Paymal downriver from Naqib. They've got exceptionally good bunkers so I think they can hold up well enough. Naqib has a solid supply of [RPGs](#) and I think he's just received Stingers. If tanks attack them, it'll be the same story. The tanks will be vulnerable to channelizing. There just isn't much open ground."

"Brother Lala, it's in our interest to offer maximum protection to Naqib's people. Air and land offensives will have to get past him to get to us. We can do the same for him with the tanks."

"Well, I'm with you on the air defenses but the threat from Zhare Dashteh is too great. We can't spare your Milans for supporting Naqib's needs."

Malang ordered the Milan units to be placed along the northwest edge of the green zone.

"Place the Stinger gunners three-quarters of the way up the hills, about a kilometer southwest of here. From there they can cover all access pathways into the valley, particularly from Qandahar air base through the Baba-e-Wali gap. That should support Naqib's people well enough."

The two of them agreed and parted. Lala Malang was pleased with the discussion. Both points of view had made for a better plan.

Abdul Latif rejoined his men, letting them know the plan's details.

The next day, Sikander and Abdul Majeed were at the designated position up the hillside, doing Stinger missile drills. Sikander gave Abdul Majeed some tips on target acquisition as assistant gunner and how to stand in a way to avoid jet blasts and chemical discharges. On the valley floor, Ejaz worked with Abdul Latif down in the ditches at the northern edge of the green zone, training other [mujahideen](#) to work the Milan system.

The Milan was a remarkably easy weapon to use. All that was necessary was to clip the nearly seven-kilogram missile to the launcher post and then aim at the target. However, it was not a fire-and-forget weapon, being wire-guided to a two-kilometer range. This required maintaining an aim on the target, as well as firing in open spaces where trees and brush wouldn't interfere. Any [APCs](#) that did manage to get past this defense would be attacked by [RPGs](#) launched from the irrigation ditches.

At about eleven in the morning, a loud boom rudely interrupted the Milan training. It had clearly originated from the green zone to the south.

Up on the hillside, Sikander's head spun. "What was tha—? Over there!" he shouted, answering his own question while pointing to a flight of eight Hind gunships on their way toward Chaharqulba. "Naqib's position. They're going after his bunker and ditches!"

The helicopters were too far away to be attacked by Sikander's Stingers, but he could see concentrated [RPG](#) fire pummeling them. Moments later, one of the choppers fell and exploded among the pomegranate trees. Sikander punched the air in satisfaction. He felt the urge to join the fray, but he had strict orders. They had been stationed on those slopes to provide air defense for Sokhchala and secondarily, to Chaharqulba, but under no circumstances were they to move. Abdul Majeed looked over his shoulder. Noting two other Stinger-equipped [mujahideen](#) climbing up the slopes to get closer to where he and Sikander were standing, he motioned for them to hold fast for a moment before waving them up toward him once he was sure that they weren't under threat from any Hinds.

Half an hour after the rocket and bomb attacks on Chaharqulba began, the tanks at Zhare Dashteh started rumbling southwest along the edge of the green zone toward a location from which they could pound Naqib's forces. Abdul Latif had to act quickly. "We have to intercept these tanks!" he shouted to Ejaz and the other [mujahideen](#). "Remember, when you aim the missile, keep the target in your sights until it's hit, then run to the next spot. Don't stay put or they'll turn you into dust! Wait for my signal. We'll launch a few together to confuse them. I want them to worry about how many firing locations we have."

"Let's go, Uncle!" called Ejaz as he ran to take up his position. Abdul Latif followed suit, signaling for the already spread out gunners to increase their separation to between eighty and a hundred meters each.

As the tanks moved closer, Abdul Latif gave the signal. Five missiles went rushing to their targets. The anti-[RPG](#) sandbags worn by the tanks were useless. The Soviet T-62 and T-55 armor was simply too thin to remain protected and four of the missiles made contact with their quarry. The tanks that were hit appeared to explode from within as they came to rest amid a cloud of billowing white smoke that quickly turned black. Abdul Latif motioned to his gunners to move about fifty meters to the southwest while remaining in the irrigation ditch. But as the tank columns gathered speed, it was hard for Abdul Latif and his people, despite their spread out positions, to remain fully engaged.

From their vantage point on the western valley slopes, Abdul Majeed and Sikander were able to watch the unfolding scene in the valley to their left, where Abdul Latif and Ejaz had attacked the tanks, and to their right toward Chaharqulba, where a heavy firefight was underway. The [DRA](#) forces were advancing with [APCs](#) hoping they would find sufficiently softened up [mujahideen](#). A hail of [AK-47](#) fire and [RPGs](#), making easy prey of the armored personnel carriers, met them instead.

The [mujahideen](#) shot anyone emerging from the [APCs](#) that didn't immediately gesture surrender. Having gained the upper hand, they even emerged from their bunkers to face the increasingly demoralized [DRA](#) soldiers.

"Most of the enemy's pulling back!" Abdul Majeed yelled, succumbing to a rare display of glee. In the distance he could also see several surrendering infantry, hands held high, approaching Naqib's defending [mujahideen](#).

Meanwhile, despite moderate tank losses inflicted by Abdul Latif's sustained Milan fire, Naqib's positions were still taking a pounding from the advancing tank column, as well as from Nagahan much further to the southwest of Chaharqulba and well beyond reach of anything out of Sokhchala.

Sikander was awed at what it took to stand and fight in the face of such an onslaught. *That's real courage*, he mulled.

Despite the earlier success against the [APCs](#), the [mujahideen](#) in the valley at Chaharqulba were clearly unable to make the headway needed against

the tanks. Although able to penetrate tough armor and devastate a tank, [RPGs](#) proved unable to get past simple sandbags, which interfered with their designed detonation system and on many occasions caused the [RPG](#) simply to bounce off a sandbag and fall away harmlessly. The tanks, however, could never get sufficiently close to destroy the stronghold. The pomegranate orchards presented too thick a barrier to penetrate.

“They don’t seem to want to push it,” observed Sikander.

“No. They’re being forced to move along the edge of the green zone and won’t come into the open where they’d—”

A deafening roar came, initially from nowhere but then from just over their heads as a pair of Sukhoi Su-25s screamed past the two air defense gunners, descending into the valley to their northeast. They were flying at no more than thirty meters above the downward sloping valley wall but only a moment later leveled off as they readied for a bombing run.

“It’s a ground attack on Sokhchala!” shouted Sikander. “They came from our side. We see their rear ends. We’re firing!” he continued, more annoyed than afraid. Sikander and Abdul Majeed indicated to their fellow Stinger crew to follow suit. Just as Sikander was returning his attention to the jets, he saw an approaching Stinger team about a hundred meters away, coming from the direction of Chaharqulba.

[Alhamdulillah!](#) They do have Stingers, noted a relieved Sikander. However, he quickly had to refocus on the two Sukhois. He shouldered his weapon and went through the routine. The aircraft were doing all the right things for him by moving directly away, slowing down for their bombing run, and holding altitude. Seconds later he fired. On the heels of his own missile, another was on its way from somewhere to Sikander’s right.

Sikander’s missile had been launched at the lowest angle possible but made it cleanly out of the tube, ignited its boost-sustain motor, and pursued the aircraft with determination. Intercepting its quarry less than five seconds later, it erupted in a huge fireball. A moment earlier, an airplane had been flying in the sky over the orchards of Arghandab. Now, just burning fragments rained down on the trees below. The second Sukhoi instinctively banked away from the explosion, though the pilot might have improved his odds by doing the opposite, using the fireball to confuse a second missile’s IR sensor. Luckily, he hadn’t, as his aircraft likewise failed to dissuade the missile, which visited the same fate on the hapless jet. The second pilot did, however, manage to eject moments before impact, escaping the bulk of the fireball’s wrath.

Sikander stared at the parachute descending into the mêlée below. He was taken by the oddly beautiful color and the graceful way it floated, which seemed so out of place among the rest of the battle activities. The hypnosis was short-lived.

“Sikander! We have to move from here!” shouted Abdul Majeed. They had no time to cheer on this occasion, and neither had Sikander the time to consider the words of Abdul Latif when he’d made his first kill in Laghar Juy. Abdul Latif had been wrong about the second kill. There hadn’t been time to hesitate. Somehow, the killing just happened. It wasn’t easy or hard. It just was.

There could be no dwelling on this complex thought, however. Eight helicopters emerged from behind the hill heading to a point over the northern tank column, which had slowed down to focus on Chaharqulba. The slowing column did, however, enable Abdul Latif to reengage the tanks as he caught up with them.

But one of the Hinds was not tracking to the same course. It was heading for the Stinger gunners in the telling posture of attack.

Coming from somewhere behind and to his far left Sikander caught a glimpse of a white and orange streak heading straight for the helicopter. The helicopter’s gunner had meanwhile managed to get off one rocket round and was readying for a second rocket when awareness of the oncoming Stinger forced the pilot to try to evade it, futile though that was. The doomed helicopter’s rocket landed and exploded just to Sikander’s right and he felt himself being hurled to his left, landing hard on the ground several meters from where he’d been standing. He was dazed and barely conscious. When he came to his senses, the offending helicopter had been replaced by flames and fragments heading for the valley floor.

Shaken, Sikander remained on the ground but raised himself enough to rest on his elbows and to turn to see the Stinger gunner who had saved his life. Had there not been another missile ready and aiming at that helicopter, Sikander’s own weapon could certainly not have been prepared in time to avoid either rockets or Gatling gunfire killing him. Gasping for breath, he conveyed his appreciation with a grin. The grin broadened.

“Irfan! Usman!” cried Sikander to the young [mujahid](#) and his brother trudging up the hill toward him. He tried to get up but saw that he was bleeding from his right ankle. A small rock had struck him. Luckily, he had been near a boulder large enough to remain unmoved that shielded the rest of him from the rocket warhead’s blast.

“Sikander! [Alhamdulillah](#), we *do* meet again!” cried out Irfan. His expression lost some of its glow when he saw the blood streaming from Sikander’s foot. “Are you all right?”

“I think so!”

Sikander used his launcher to prop himself up and hopped on his good foot for a moment. Looking down he saw a patch of red on his right ankle. A chip of bone had been sheared off along with the skin covering it. He gently let down his right foot to put weight on it. The adrenalin was working.

“Irfan...ha! Only Allah could have known you were needed here today. How are you, brother?” Sikander made his best attempt at a hug for each of them.

“We are both very fine. Very fine!” Irfan grinned, saying his last two words in English, before acknowledging the truth of Sikander’s observation and Allah’s blessings for their collective training. “We’re here from Khost to help with Mullah Naqib’s defense of Chaharqulba.”

“We have to wrap that wound,” Abdul Majeed observed. In short order, he tore a piece of Sikander’s [gamees](#) to bandage the injury after washing off the dirt and debris with water from his flask. The water stung but Sikander was otherwise in working order.

“I can still shoot.”

“We’re counting on it,” replied Abdul Majeed.

“Abdul Majeed, this is Irfan and Usman. I trained with them in Scotland.”

Abdul Majeed introduced himself to the brothers with a customary greeting hug.

“Abdul Rahman’s brother!” exclaimed Irfan. The reunion and introductions were interrupted by two Stinger streaks of white smoke drawing trails over the valley floor as they headed to their targets. Again, bright orange flashes were followed by burning debris. From the remaining helicopters a salvo of Gatling gun fire and rockets sped back across the valley. One of the more distant helicopters had now been targeted by another missile coming from farther south across the gap and it too was hit. The Soviet pilots were clearly unprepared for such intensity and diversity of firing locations.

Adrenalin had numbed more than Sikander’s sense of physical pain. “There’s a couple closer to us that we can go for!” He felt as if he was owed something. His injury clamored for its [badal](#). Quickly hobbling toward the boulder where he’d been standing in the first place, he leaned against it and motioned to Abdul Majeed to bring him the grip stock of his weapon and one of the readied missile rounds. Sikander latched it on and nodded over to Irfan and Usman and the other gunner teams directing them to target the rearmost helicopter on the left. He planned to take the one in front of him to the right, which was firing at Stinger gunners lower down the valley.

The left helicopter was hit first while Sikander wound up his missile and quickly fired. His target, however, was gaining altitude and as it did so,

Sikander saw the missile wasn't adapting to the maneuver. He watched it heading out just above the middle of the helicopter formation, where it exploded without hitting anything.

The sensor's malfunctioned, or maybe the adaptive guidance, he thought. It didn't matter. Having exploded in the midst of the helicopter formation, the Stinger sufficiently jarred the pilots that they decided it was time to withdraw. Their commander didn't see the sense in a [badal](#) mission anyway.

No more jets came.

With their advance brought to a halt, all but about a hundred of the [DRA](#) forces chose to retreat. The tanks did the same, despite thus far having remained committed. But Abdul Latif's team did manage to immobilize two more near the tail end of the column.

Among the [DRA](#) forces, those who did not retreat downed their weapons and raised their hands high, hoping to be accepted as defectors. Most of them were. It had not been a good day for the Afghan army.

With the withdrawing tanks visible from the slopes, Sikander, Abdul Majeed, Irfan, and Usman, together with their fellow gunner teams, cheered loudly "[Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!](#)" After about half an hour, when it became clear that a follow-up attack was unlikely, they started walking—and limping—down the slopes toward Sokhchala.

Lala Malang's men regrouped that evening to review the day's performance. Abdul Latif and Ejaz described the situation on the ground and the assistance they had provided Naqib's men in Chaharqulba. Their own casualties had been light, with the loss of two men and about twelve injured, mostly from flying wood shards from tank shells hitting nearby trees.

"Again, they underestimated our weapons and our advantage in this terrain," remarked Lala Malang.

"Yes, they did," replied Abdul Latif, perplexed at the paucity of intellect demonstrated by the Afghan army. "They apparently felt it was safe to come in with sandbags on their tanks. I guess our [RPGs](#) helped them to believe that but now that they know we have Milans, they'll be adapting their strategy."

"Certainly I would," acknowledged Lala Malang as he began discussing possible responses. "The Soviet air cover and motorized rifles weren't very committed today either, don't you agree, Abdul Latif?"

Abdul Latif nodded. "They must know that they don't have a good response to our Stingers, at least for now, and it really isn't a fight worth losing helicopters and pilots for. Their Sukhois weren't effective either, though I wouldn't rule them out just yet."

Malang agreed. "Tomorrow will give us a better indication. They might recognize that we have a weakness at our rear, toward the dam upriver. They could also bring troops over the hills by dropping them from Mi-8s on the crests of the hills to our north, or they could come in from the southern opening in the valley and fly in low, which I believe is a problem for the Stinger. Is that correct?"

"Sikander has more knowledge among us about that." Abdul Latif called out for Sikander, who dutifully hobbled over, leaning on Irfan's shoulder.

"The Stinger can be fired at a slight downward angle successfully from the valley slopes. We did it today and took out those two jets. That was with the aircraft just below our horizon," Sikander explained.

"Good! At least we know we can handle that, so you gunners are to remain on the valley slopes but much lower down than before. I want to keep you concentrated in the same areas as today but also to post lookouts up and down the valley and toward the Baba-e-Wali gap," said Lala Malang.

When the time came to break the fast, a large collective [iftar](#) was spread out for them in the local [masjid](#). As they sat for the meal, Sikander was proud to introduce Irfan and Usman to Abdul Latif and Ejaz, who in turn warmly embraced the two young men for having saved Sikander's life.

Although the following day they were ready for a repeat attack, only minor skirmishes took place, mostly with [APCs](#) advancing with poorly trained [DRA](#) troops. The effect was to swell the number of defectors who would be taken to Pakistan for interrogation and possible reorientation to return as [mujahideen](#). That day, Irfan and Usman returned to Chaharqulba.

From some defectors Mullah Malang learned that another [DRA](#) offensive much closer to Naqib's stronghold was being made ready. Abdul Latif suggested to Malang that it would be appropriate to assist Naqib. Chaharqulba was closer to the important Baba-e-Wali gap than Sokhchala, and it was from that gap that most of the enemy resources were being launched. Reluctantly, Malang agreed, and three days after the first skirmish Abdul Latif's troop set off toward Chaharqulba.

Arriving with more Milans and Stingers, and adding to those in Naqib's possession, they were warmly received by Naqib.

"Those crazy [DRA](#) commanders! Their boys have no skills and still they're being sent to attack us!" remarked Naqib. "We just had an [APC](#) captured yesterday. We told the infantry commander to go back and tell his own commanders that they should stop before more of our Afghan sons get killed! All we got was his sorry story about the threat to his wife and children in Kabul, if he withdrew. [Haraamzadas](#)!" he uttered, shaking his head in disgust.

"Where would you suggest we place our Stingers and Milans?" asked Abdul Latif.

"Over there for the Stingers." Naqib pointed to a cluster of ruined village homes on a gently sloping part of the west side of the valley. "From those positions you can take cover and you should be able to attack helicopters coming from most directions. They usually come in flights of four or eight, so it'll be a good idea to get eight gunner teams up there. We have the Stingers—and Sikander is it?—I've heard good things about your skills from Irfan. Why not take charge tomorrow? Let's see how you fare."

Sikander nodded in acknowledgment, and stiffened with pride as he exchanged glances with a grinning Irfan.

Naqib continued. "For their tanks, I'd suggest the irrigation ditches on the western edge of the green zone. From there you have adequate cover and can hit tanks coming in from Zhare Dashteh."

"That's pretty much what we did a few days ago," noted Ejaz.

"We'll make sure that happens," said a voice from the doorway of the bunker.

"Akhtarjhan! Come in, come in." Naqib beckoned, waving his hand. "Akhtarjhan, this is Abdul Latif and his men from Nangarhar. They're here to assist. His best gunner is a friend of our Stinger brothers!"

"Welcome! [Jazaakumullah](#) for your support," thanked Akhtarjhan with appropriate deference for Abdul Latif's age, even though he outranked him.

Abdul Latif returned the thanks and the two men discussed the defense plan in more detail. Abdul Latif had heard of Akhtarjhan from other people and was familiar with the tragic story of his becoming a [mujahid](#) at the age of twelve when his older brothers were killed in Babur Village. Now in his early twenties, he was no older than Abdul Rahman but had become a legend for his daring and bravery in a number of attacks and ambushes against the [DRA](#) and Soviet troops.

The following day, at about nine in the morning, the Stinger teams walked the six hundred meters to the area that Naqib had indicated. Several bombed out and abandoned dwellings awaited them, so they had their pick of ruined walls to use as cover when firing. The location was also ideal for intercepting attacks on Sokhchala, where Lala Malang had prepared his ground defenses. Once they were together, Sikander spread out his gunners to

place each two-man team about fifty meters from any neighboring team. At that distance they would be well separated but could still make intelligible hand signals.

Following a now established pattern, at around eleven, aerial bombardments normally began, after which enemy ground forces would advance supported by remote shelling from tank columns that remained in open ground on the southwest and northeast of the strongholds all along the plain, west of the river.

Almost on cue, the first flight of Hinds rolled in, flying a hundred meters above the orchards. The Stinger teams were ready and only had to initiate the BCU gas release to arm their weapons, which they held off doing until the helicopters were within two kilometers. They would continue to hold their fire if the helicopters were far from the stronghold of Naqib's bunkers, as the pilots would be wasting their bombs and there'd be no need to give away the Stinger positions prematurely.

But the [DRA](#) and Soviet pilots had no confusion about the bunkers' locations and were on their way to soften them up. There wouldn't be any bomb wasting.

Abruptly, the flight clustered into two groups of four. In response, Sikander reorganized the Stinger teams to have all eight ready to fire but ordered that only four would fire the initial salvo. If the helicopter force were to turn on the gunners' location, the second four would fire, while the first readied fresh rounds. He assigned a young [mujahid](#), Zahir Mirza, to form and lead the second group, asking him to split off to take a position about a hundred and fifty meters from the first and to lay low until it was time to fire.

"Sikander. Now," urged Abdul Majeed.

"Agreed." Sikander signaled in the direction of Irfan to his left and the two other gunner teams to his right and rear. In a few moments, four white, smoky snakes, each with a missile for a head, wound their way to their designated targets. One failed to go off and three made direct hits, but only two achieved immediate destruction. The damaged helicopter withdrew, flying erratically. The pilot struggled to maneuver but eventually lost control. With its tail wagging, he flew it into the ground, where it exploded on impact. Other helicopters dropped their 100-kilogram bombs over the bunkers and fired rockets into the irrigation ditches wherever they saw [RPGs](#) being fired at them.

As this was happening, two helicopters approached the source of their fellow crews' demise. They had held back, hoping to discover Stinger launch positions from any initial salvo. As they approached, Sikander waited for missiles to be fired by his second group.

Nothing.

His head swiveled, as he peered into the distance at Zahir and saw him fumbling with his launcher.

Why aren't they firing!?

Surprise turned into dread. Unable to reload and wind up in time to hit the rapidly advancing helicopters, Sikander and his fellow gunners were sitting ducks. It was time to stop sitting.

"Run!" Sikander yelled, as Gatling gunfire bullets began zinging within what seemed like only centimeters from his ears, chewing up anything in their path.

The teams immediately sprinted away from the helicopters. Sikander was the laggard, thanks to his ankle injury. He cursed it and whatever devil had intervened to paralyze Zahir.

Zahir hadn't screwed on the BCU correctly, leaving his impulse switch inoperative. Instead of asking his three fellow teams from the second group to fire, he panicked, fixating on the obstinate BCU.

Finally, two of Zahir's fellow gunners, who had been distracted by their leader's difficulties, set upon the advancing helicopters. Two streaks lunged at the Hinds, which were each less than a kilometer away by now in hot pursuit of the four Stinger teams from the first group. Both gunships were instantly arrested and their flaming remnants came crashing into the barren ground north of the green zone.

At last, Zahir managed to get the BCU connected and shouldered his weapon as the one remaining team member who hadn't fired joined him in the attack. They scored direct hits against two of the remaining four helicopters that were harassing Naqib's bunkers. The two surviving helicopters withdrew in haste. None of the eight-man air-defense team had latched a second missile round and held off from doing so as they saw the enemy withdrawing.

Keenly aware of just how close to death he had been, Abdul Majeed grinned. "That...was *close!*" he gasped, gazing at the panting Sikander.

"It certainly—" began Sikander, but abruptly stopped, transfixed by a new expression on Abdul Majeed's face. The grin had given way to a pained frown as Abdul Majeed stared past Sikander's shoulder.

"Irfan? *Irfaaan!*" came the plea from Usman as he lifted Irfan's limp torso. Blood was streaming out of Irfan's right side and head. The young [mujahid](#) wasn't moving. Sikander hurriedly limped across to check on the youth who had been his gunnery class fellow and only three days earlier had saved his life.

The injury was serious. Irfan had taken a hit squarely in the right side from the back and had a grazing, but still severe wound on the side of his head.

"*Irfaaan!*" Sikander emitted a harrowing moan, attempting to evoke a response from the young [mujahid](#). Irfan's eyes opened slowly and he began coughing up blood as he looked up at his brother and Sikander.

"We'll get you back down to the village." Sikander spoke in a soft voice that transformed into a bark as he turned and shouted "Over here!" to the other gunners.

"N...o...oh!" Irfan struggled to get out the single word. "I'm done...not going to—" He stole another gasp of air as he began to murmur the [kalimah](#), "La...ilaha...illallahhhh..." in a low voice and then continued moving his lips without making a sound. A moment later, as the air vacated his lungs, his soul vacated his eyes.

"*Irfaaaaan!*" Usman's plaintive cry came as he nestled his brother's head against his breast and rocked to and fro.

Sikander laid a hand gently on Usman's shoulder, belying the anguished expression on his own face. *Why!? How could the Almighty have seen fit to pick Irfan?* Bitterness at having had the good fortune to reconnect with his friend only to see him die a few days later forced Sikander to turn his head away; away from the ghastly scene, his leaky eyes firmly closed. The war had exacted yet another heavy price from this hard-hit family and had whittled it down to a solitary survivor, left to mourn them all. Consumed by grief, Sikander began sobbing with Usman.

"We can't stay put," urged Abdul Majeed as tactfully as he could. "Sikander, we need to move. I think I see another flight coming in from over Baba-e-Wali."

Abdul Majeed alternated between looking back at the battle in the valley and forward to the dead Irfan with the two young men mourning him. Finally he laid his hand on Sikander's shoulder and without saying any more, squeezed it tightly. Sikander understood and arose, picking up his launcher

and missile. With a heavy heart he asked Usman to do the same but the request proved futile. Sikander didn't press the boy. A part of Usman didn't care if he lived or died now. *If it's God's plan to finish off the family then let it be this day*, he thought.

Explaining he'd be back, Sikander turned to get deeper into the valley, indicating to the remaining gunners to latch their second missile rounds. "And this time, *be ready to fire!*" he screamed in a rare moment of unbridled anger channeled through a laser glare at the mortified Zahir.

Irfan's words from Applecross poured into every fiber of Sikander's being. It took all his energy to concentrate on the shapes silhouetted against the gray sky. Six helicopters were on their way in the general direction of where the Stinger teams had gathered near Irfan's body.

"Spread out!" he screamed. "Let's get 'em!"

Abdul Majeed helped him latch the next round and Sikander inserted the BCU, initiated it, and aimed. He would take his time on this one. The moment he got a lock, his missile was unleashed. Two more followed suit, after which the gunners immediately ran, looking for cover among the bombed out ruins. The helicopters hovered three kilometers away and although their pilots saw where the gunners had run to, they were forced to maneuver to avoid the streaking missiles heading for them.

The only thing lying between them and destruction was a possible missile malfunction. None of the missiles obliged. Another three fresh streaks of orange and white smoke leapt in quick succession toward the remaining three helicopters that were by now in full retreat. One of them took a hit and was obliterated. The other two escaped injury as the missiles aimed at them missed then exploded harmlessly, triggered by their self-destruct timers. Their inexperienced gunners hadn't waited for the proper target lock tone.

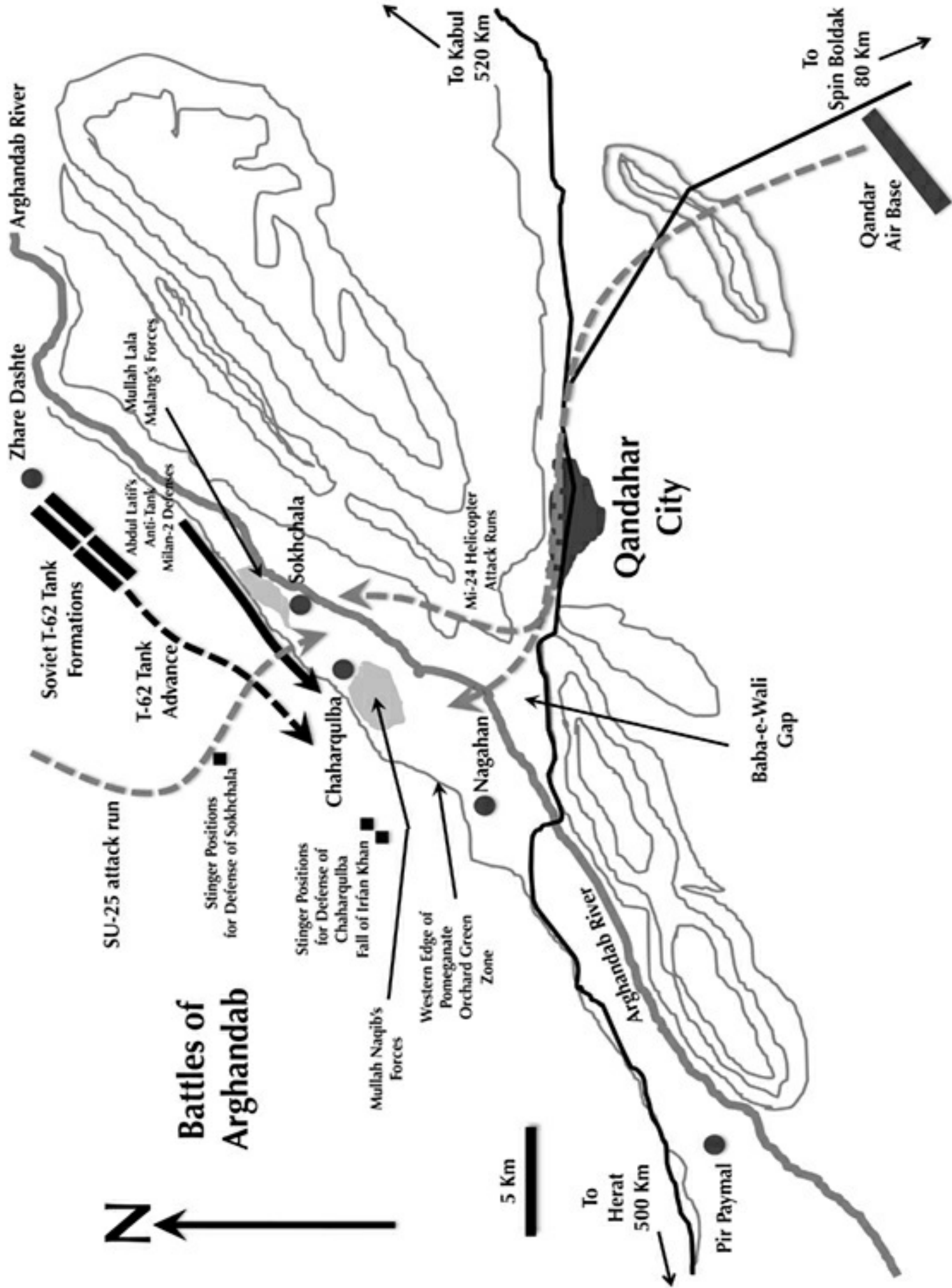
The gunner teams regrouped.

"They won't be back today." Sikander smirked, wanting to be amused by his quip. Instead, he felt a sinking feeling as he returned to processing Irfan's death. He remembered the [ayah](#) from the Holy [Qur'an](#) customarily uttered after a death and generally during hardship, "[Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'un](#)."

Taking Irfan's body, the gunners returned to Chaharqulba. Abdul Majeed explained the day's events to Ejaz and Abdul Latif. The latter had also sustained a minor wound. They were saddened by the loss of a young man so soon after coming to know him.

"Usman, this is true [shahadah](#)." Abdul Latif offered, his eyes creasing as a sympathetic smile came to his face. "Your brother has an assured place in heaven. His heart was true and he knew what he was fighting for. He wasn't concerned with removing Soviets from this country. He was fighting to keep its Muslim character so that you and he could live in peace as Muslims and—" Abdul Latif shrugged and glanced at Sikander making it clear he should pick up the task.

Sikander spoke. "Usman, your brother's death is a sad loss. He mentioned this possibility to me when we were in training. I know you... you've had no family but each other." Sikander paused. He had to take an unexpectedly difficult breath. "He told me that and asked that I...we," Sikander glanced at Abdul Latif, "we should take you in as one of us. As a brother."



“Yes, Sikander. He and I had discussed this more than once regarding each other,” replied Usman. “I just...just didn’t believe it would ever come to this,” he continued, his eyes streaming. “Not after losing everyone!” Usman burst into tears once more. Abdul Latif laid his hand gently on Usman’s shoulder, as Mullah Naqib walked in.

“Hmm! [Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji’un!](#)” he pronounced, slowly shaking his head and wearing a solemn look. “A [shaheed!](#)” Naqib turned to Usman. “We must humbly thank Allah for forgiving him all his sins as he now carries the mark of the [shaheed](#). He has all the more reward for fighting and dying while fasting in this, the last week of [Ramadhan!](#) Truly Usman, I’m envious of your brother’s fate. Come, we must bury him right here in Chaharqulba, where he earned his [shahadah](#).”

Usman could not respond, and was unable to offer much by way of opinion or decision about Irfan’s burial. He felt only emptiness. His only surviving connection to the past was gone.

The body was bathed, scented, wrapped in a white cloth brought in from the village, and finally buried as everyone looked on, offering their own prayers and throwing their handfuls of dirt over the grave.

Over the next several days, Sikander made many efforts to get closer to Usman. The person who best understood his experience was Akhtarjhan, and Sikander asked the commander if he would try to help Usman through his grieving. Akhtarjhan offered to try but warned Sikander that the grieving would take its own course and time.

The skirmishes came and went and the [mujahideen](#) took more casualties. At one point when they had become dispirited at being unable to make much headway against the [DRA’s](#) armored weapons, over the objections of his commanders, Mullah Naqib demonstrated the reality of his envy of Irfan’s [shahadah](#). Taking a weapon and striding out alone into the fray, he proclaimed: “They’ve tried to conquer this place for years and this? This is their last throw!” The move rallied his commanders.

After almost seven weeks, well into July, the [DRA](#) offensive seemed to peter out as they abandoned their revenge mission, returning to the status quo of occupying Qandahar while leaving the western Arghandab Valley to the [mujahideen](#). However, their losses were severe; at least five hundred dead and over a thousand defections, destruction of a hundred vehicles, tanks, and light transports as well as over a dozen helicopters and aircraft. In short, the Arghandab counter-attack was a disaster for the enemy.

The [mujahideen](#) had perfected a clever approach of using terrain to dig in and defend against attacks, and when not being attacked, to make highly targeted, well-orchestrated ambushes. They had proven themselves effective in speeding up defections and desertions from which they derived much intelligence and morale. They had also become adept at attacking a withdrawing force, especially if there was any disarray in its rear.

On July 20, 1987, less than three weeks after Arghandab, the Soviet Union announced its intent to withdraw from Afghanistan. General Gromov, commander of the 40th Army, drew up the plans.

By the end of their Arghandab expedition, Sikander had sustained a minor injury to his right ankle. Ejaz had been hit in the left arm by wood shards from a tank shell exploding in a nearby tree, and Abdul Latif had taken a small piece of shrapnel in his left leg. But despite the battle wounds and death all around, he had gained another [mujahid](#) son.



Chapter 9

Rabia

WITHDRAWAL BY THE ENEMY into Qandahar left little point in remaining in Arghandab. Abdul Latif and his men had been away from home during the important month of [Ramadhan](#), and having missed the festival of [‘Eid-ul-Fitr](#), their absence would be all the more acutely felt by their families. It was time to go home. Abdul Latif made the customary request for permission to take his leave of Lala Malang, who equally customarily granted it. Freshly supplied with rations and mules, the group wound its way back toward the border at Chaman.

In three days, they were again at the small village just north of the Khojak tunnel from which they had set out. A message was sent into Quetta for the [ISI](#) to collect them and before long, they were in Pakistan. Reaching Peshawar was both easier and more difficult than on the outbound journey. There were no bulky weapons this time—just their own [AK-47s](#)—making flying by C130 unnecessary. Traveling in two troop carriers by road up through the remote towns of Zhob, Dera Ismail [Khan](#), and Kohat, in two days, they arrived at Peshawar’s airport. From there they were taken in small vans and pickups in groups of five or six, to Arif’s place and thence via the staging house back to their respective villages.

Abdul Latif led the last group to Jamrud, and upon their arrival, Arif greeted them heartily.

“Brother, reports of [mujahideen](#) action in Qandahar are causing a stir among the [ISI](#). They’ve been interviewing the many deserters that were brought back here. [Alhamdulillah](#), it sounds like it went well. I’m dying to hear the details.”

Abdul Latif did the best he could to relate the experience and as he finished his dry summary, he shrugged wearily, wafting his hand in the general direction of his young band. “You’ll get more details from these brave young fellows.”

Arif turned to them but before he could say anything, Sikander began, “Arif [bhai](#), this is my friend, Usman. His elder brother, Irfan, became a [shaheed](#) in Arghandab just before [‘Eid-ul-Fitr](#).”

“Oh! Uh, [inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji’un](#). [Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#), Usman,” responded Arif. A look of genuine sympathy came over him as he lost his characteristic smile. Usman returned the [salaam](#) quietly and politely but didn’t say more. “Well,” uttered Arif resignedly, “perhaps we can discuss your experiences later.”

Returning his gaze to Sikander, whose formerly wispy beard was now more full-bodied, Arif became aware of the elevated standing projected by the young man. He was no longer the youth having to defend the pronunciation of his own name, a little less than a year earlier. He was battle hardened and ready for anyone and anything.

Seeing the indelicacy of discussing the fighting, Arif offered Sikander the customary phone call, which Sikander graciously accepted. He hurried upstairs to the phone.

“Hello?” The voice was a little deeper than Sikander remembered.

“Jamil?”

“[Bhai](#)-jan? Oh, [bhai](#), at last! It’s so good to hear from you.”

“Yes, it’s me. How are you? Where are [Amnee](#) and [Abba](#)?”

“I’m well. [Abba](#)-jee is out and [Amnee](#)’s taken Sameena to the doctor. She won’t be—”

“Sameena? Is she all right?”

“Nothing serious. I’m sure they’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Well, give them my love and [salaams](#). Wish everyone [‘Eid Mubarak](#). Listen; I’m sorry I couldn’t be with you for this [‘Eid](#). [InshaAllah](#) it won’t happen again, Jamil.”

“When are you coming back, [bhai](#)-jan? *When*? It’s been almost a year—”

“Jamil, the Russians are readying for a withdrawal. Can you believe it?”

“It *is* hard to believe. I wish I could join you, but there’s no chance of that! [Abba](#) tells me I have to finish school. He’s—”

“He’s right. Jamil. School’s important and that’s all there is to it. Trust me. Seriously [yaar](#)...for both of us, you have to study. Don’t disappoint [Abba](#) or [Amnee](#) like I know I did. Look, I have to go now. I’ll write if I can, or send notes, all right?”

“[Bhai](#)-jan, it’s not the same without you. It’s been long enough. It’s time to come home.”

“I will, Jamil. That’s a promise. Listen; I’ll call again as soon as I can. [Allah Hafiz](#).”

Hanging up the phone, Sikander sighed. He stared through Arif’s beautiful rug, pondering life in Hayatabad and how it was proceeding without him. He uttered a short prayer for the family’s wellbeing before returning downstairs to the war-room. After a restful night in Jamrud, everyone was ready and eager the following morning to be heading to Laghar Juy.

The trip was uneventful. But as Hinna was now a part of the family, a stopover at her parents’ place was obligatory. Yaqub and Shahnaz fussed over Ejaz and provided the men with the customary gifts to be taken to their daughter’s new family.

More than two months after they’d left, the men were descending the slopes into Laghar Juy under the sweltering heat of a July afternoon. Mercifully, a plentiful supply of snowmelt coursing through the numerous brooks and streams left them with no shortage of water. By late afternoon, the long-missed travelers were finally at Abdul Latif’s home. Alone at the time, Razya was delighted, relieved, and excited, before pointing out that everyone else was at Noor’s place, as she eagerly prepared to accompany the men there.

Abdul Latif introduced Usman to Razya, who welcomed him warmly and doubly so upon learning he was the brother of a recent [shaheed](#). Without hesitation she declared that he would bunk up with Sikander at Abdul Latif’s place.

Everyone proceeded to Noor’s. An extra spring was in Sikander’s step.

Abdul Rahman and Saleem hugged the returning men with relief and delight. Noor stroked Ejaz’s lowered head as she whispered a prayer of thanks for his safe return. Rabia practically enveloped her brother with her greeting, before turning to Sikander, giving him a welcoming look and [salaam](#). His eyes connected with hers, reluctantly letting go of them as finally, she acknowledged her beloved uncle.

The welcoming done with, Rabia unleashed her usual onslaught of inquiry and probing upon everyone, except, of course, Usman, to whom she projected her shy self; at least for now.

“Brother Ejaz!” began Rabia, “I’ve known Sister Hinna for longer than you have. How odd is that?” she chided, her eyes lit by a glint of mischief.

Ejaz smirked. “And I’ve known *you* for far too long, Rabia!” He laughed for the first time in many days. Ejaz was amused by his quip but more by his awareness of Sikander’s emerging interest in her, while she could only suspect it. However small, it was an advantage over his sister, which was too rare to be left unrelished.

“Where’s Hinna?” he asked anxiously.

“Can’t wait to see your sweetheart again?” Rabia goaded him. Ejaz paid the briefest attention to the taunt as he went in search of his wife. Hinna

could not have expected her husband back at that particular time, so her absence wasn't noteworthy.

Out in the back, seated on her [patthra](#) and working the small stove on the floor, Hinna had been so engrossed with starting a flame that the mild commotion going on in the front of the thick-walled house hadn't registered with her. With the flame started, she was getting up to select a cook pot when the image of her husband standing with the low orange sun lighting his face like a beacon caught her eye. Her big eyes widened as awareness of her husband's presence sank in.

"Ejaaaz!" she exclaimed, as she stepped away from the stove and lunged toward him for a hug. They embraced, holding each other tightly, words adequately absent from either of their minds.

Buoyed by the excitement of reunion with his love, Ejaz determined he would take up the matter of Sikander's interest in Rabia. If it seemed serious he would work toward achieving a match without allowing things to go awry through some faux pas in [Pashtun](#) etiquette on Sikander's part. They were both young enough to be in no particular hurry, and Rabia's wishes had in any case to be discovered. Who knew? Perhaps she had someone—or type of someone—completely different in mind for herself. For Ejaz, knowing what she wanted was important, however outside the norm that might be.

Meanwhile Razya had her own eye on the situation. The 'Eid-cum-homecoming celebration she had organized provided no conclusive indication, but her shrewd insight had thus far led her to detect a stirring in Sikander whenever he was in Rabia's presence. He would become a little cockier, or fumble for words, both of which, in Razya's calculus, were positive signs. But for now, she would simply remain watchful.

It had been about a year since Mikhail Gorbachev made the first pronouncements of an intention to withdraw from Afghanistan. The war's expense had debilitated his country's economy, [mujahideen](#) weapons had become too sophisticated, and the border with Pakistan was simply too porous to block support for them from that direction. The Soviets wanted to be done with the quagmire, but more than that, they wanted the luxury of a graceful withdrawal, which in turn, would mean propping up whatever regime was to remain in their absence.

On the heels of Arghandab, as General Gromov was busy working out exit details, the fighting continued, though with a difference. Outside the major towns and villages there was little to gain by engaging the [mujahideen](#), as it would mean either unnecessary loss of men and assets or the additional defection of [DRA](#) forces. Neither of these would advance the Soviet cause, so the fighting took on a noticeably lower tempo. The [mujahideen](#) for their part had no interest in attacking the major cities and roads. They preferred to dig in with extremely well defended positions but would readily ambush the enemy whenever they became aware of large impending troop or hardware movements.

Life in Laghar Juy acquired the quality of an almost forgotten peace. People farmed and rebuilt their homes, and even began to engage in recreation. A favorite activity among the villagers was to head up into the gentle, lower slopes of the [Spin Ghar](#) for leisurely walks or picnics. In late July, Noor decided to organize such an outing in honor of Ejaz and Hinna on the slopes near Laghar Juy's stream. They would cook a lamb and make [kebabs](#) and steaks out in the open. At this time, with the snowmelt in full force, the stream flowed more fully and briskly as it drained into the Kabul River near Batawul. It needed to be approached with some caution, so the family gathered near the shade of a cluster of walnut trees about fifty meters from its east bank.

While Abdul Latif and his two sons slaughtered the lamb, Ejaz and Saleem buried a clay pot in the ground. They fired it up with wood to form a primitive but highly effective [tandoor](#). Once the lamb was completely cooked, Noor and Hinna had the task of combining the meat with fresh vegetables and coarse bread. Meanwhile, Usman, Rabia, Saleem and Sikander took a stroll along the edge of the stream.

Having shed her initial stranger-shyness in front of Usman, Rabia, as usual, did most of the talking. "Brother Usman, you know I've tried to get Sikander to say something about Scotland, but he always brushes me off with simple remarks. I know that you and your brother, may Allah grant him [jannah](#), were also there. Perhaps *you* can tell me more?"

Usman paused, wearing a distant look. "Seems like a dream now, Rabia."

"Sikander only says it was...beautiful," Rabia shrugged, rolling her eyes.

Continuing the distant stare, Usman opened up: "It took us all day and was dark when we got there. We were taken to a cabin and dropped to sleep exhausted from the travel, but when we awoke I was amazed to see such a scene."

"Yes?"

"There was a large stretch of water in front of us, and small islands with hills dotting the water, and behind those were even bigger ones. The sun set by sinking behind those islands and, Sikander's right, each sunset *was* truly beautiful. Irfan and I would..." Usman stopped and shrugged.

"Did you ever get to the water or visit the mountains?" Rabia asked. Sikander looked on with interest. Her handling of Usman's sensibilities made her all the more attractive to him.

"We did once. The soldiers took us in a bus. It took us through such scenic country." Usman smiled.

"What was it like to fly in a helicopter?"

"See what I mean, Usman?" interjected Sikander.

The men laughed. Rabia pouted.

"I don't mind," Usman continued, directing a sympathetic glance toward Rabia. "It's great, Rabia. The ground gets farther and farther away and it doesn't seem like you're really moving. Just floating."

"You've a wonderful way of describing it." Rabia cast a mild scowl at Sikander for failing to be as evocative in his own descriptions. It was Sikander's turn to roll his eyes.

"Certainly you—Oh! *Aghhh!*" Rabia shrieked as her left leg sank into some deceptively muddy soil that not only captured her foot but also under the added weight broke off from the bank and knocked her off balance. In an instant, Rabia became one with the flowing water, leaving everyone else in frozen surprise.

"Heeeellllllp!" she screamed as she was carried downstream. The water was barely two meters deep, but its speed was sufficient to make it hard to find a footing. The rest of the group in the background heard her screams and immediately Ejaz and Abdul Latif dropped their work to see what was wrong.

God! She'll drown! Sikander's heart sank.

"Hellllllp!" Rabia shrieked once again. Without further thought, Sikander whipped off his turban and outer jacket, broke off the dead branch of a nearby tree, and ran. Fortunately he was able to catch up with her as he cut across a large bend in the stream to see her approaching him near a point where the stream was wider.

“Rabia! Grab this branch!” he shouted. If she couldn’t remain near the water’s edge, there would be no option but to jump in after her.

“I...caaaaaan’t!” Her voice was barely audible over the sound of the rushing water. She was being pulled away from the bank as her entire body began to feel the water’s frigid onslaught. Taught to swim back in University Public School, Sikander knew he had to go in after her. He dropped the dead branch and leapt into the water.

After several seemingly interminable seconds he reached her, and grabbed her arm in a vise-like grip. Now together, the two of them were swept further along when, luckily, an eddy caught them. Pulling them back to the edge, the eddy enabled Sikander to grab the branch of a bush with his right hand, promptly arresting their motion. He held on to Rabia’s arm for dear life with his other hand, while locking one of his legs around the bush. With himself secure, he pulled Rabia close enough to the bank for her to find her own footing, and to use her free hand to grab the bush. Once Sikander was sure she was safe, he allowed Usman to help him out of the water while Saleem, who had never learned to swim, helped his sister. Rabia and Sikander lay down on the grassy bank, short of breath and shivering in the warm air.

“Are...you...all...right...Ra...bia?” Sikander gasped, his wet chest heaving under his soaked [qamees](#).

Her eyes closed, Rabia nodded. Still panting, she was unable to utter anything. By now Ejaz, Abdul Latif, and Noor had reached them. Noor took off her shawl and wrapped her daughter in it as much to guard her modesty as dry her off. Regaining his breath, Sikander arose and took off his [qamees](#) allowing himself to start drying in the open air.

“Rabia, pay attention to what you’re doing instead...instead of just chatt...chattering.” Still shivering, Sikander tried to maintain his dignity, dressed only in soaking wet [shalwar](#) pants, his dripping [qamees](#) now held in front of him, guarding his own modesty.

Crying and giggling, Rabia stared at Sikander, amused by his appearance and feeling considerable joy from not having drowned. When she finally grew aware of her own comic situation, the laughter won out and didn’t take long to infect Sikander.

The rest of the onlookers watched with curiosity, relieved and thankful for the safe rescue of Rabia. Seeing that disaster had been averted, they decided not to let it ruin their day and ambled back to the picnic spot.

As their clothes dried in the sun, the hot [tandoori](#) lamb aided greatly in the recovery of the two water brats. Usman expressed his regret at having let Rabia get so carried away with what he was saying that she wasn’t paying attention to where she was walking. Knowing Rabia, everyone else quickly absolved him of any responsibility.

Comments about her experience soon morphed into jokes about Rabia almost getting herself killed. Sikander watched her as she defiantly countered her bothers’ and cousins’ jibes. As she did, he couldn’t help feeling a warm glow of sympathy for her. Feelings that had been taking shape over the past several months were now coalescing into something; something powerful stirring deep inside him. The thought moved him to glance at Ejaz, whom he could see already gazing in his direction with a penetrating stare and a serious smile. Ejaz had at least one question answered. He was not alone.

With the evidence mounting, Razya was now also sure. Indeed, for the most recent experience not to seem improper, one could do worse than propose marriage.

Rabia, meanwhile, was keenly aware of the debt she owed Sikander. But in this moment, consumed by a deep sense of caring for the one who had cared for her enough to risk his life, she wanted to be with him and couldn’t explain to herself precisely why. He was surely the same Sikander she’d laughed and joked with, and yes, perhaps toyed and fought with, since losing her shyness with him all those months ago.

He was surely not.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Sikander and Rabia tried hard not to let what they were feeling become apparent to the rest of the group or, for that matter, each other. Each would occasionally steal a glance in the other’s direction and for the most part, hers didn’t coincide with his. The trying, however, was too intense to escape the watchful attentions of Ejaz and Razya, who could only hide their feelings until the time came to act.

The rest of the family seemed oblivious to these undercurrents. At least, if Abdul Latif was thinking of such things, he was being uncommonly masterful at keeping his thoughts from his face.

The warm sentiments born of the aftermath of the near drowning experience seemed to carry across the group. Slowly and discreetly, Ejaz shifted his position closer to Hinna. Her blue-green eyes were hypnotic, and he found himself experiencing a heightened tenderness toward his new bride, with whom he had spent hardly any time. Her patience at letting him be absent without complaint amplified his feelings. She understood the harsh realities of life in Afghanistan and knew that the recently completed mission was not an act of whimsy but her new husband’s dedication to a mission in which she believed even as strongly as he. Her captivating yet cheerful demeanor evoked in Ejaz the desire to be alone with her, away from the family; to learn her and be learned by her. They would be building the rest of their lives together and he wanted to press on with it.

“Would you like some more?” Hinna asked. “Ejaz?” Ejaz stared back at her, not hearing her question but merely enjoying the experience of her speaking his name. “Ejaaaz?”

“Hm? Oh, yes,” he replied holding out his plate.

The sun sank, draining the warmth from the air, as the shadows grew longer and cooler. It was time to clear up, toss the garbage in the stream, and head back to the village. It hadn’t been the kind of day that any of them had expected. But it *had* been interesting.

Ejaz and Hinna ambled a little further behind the rest, chatting amiably. They were now firmly on their path of mutual discovery. Rabia and Sikander could not, however, be seen to be doing the same. She remained by her mother’s side, overcompensating for her inner desires. Sikander also did his best to deflect attention away from him and her. He began talking about their experiences of Arghandab, at least the less painful ones, such as his fondness for the fragrance of pomegranate blossoms. He also launched a game similar to I-spy. He would say aloud an English word representing something he could see, and any of the rest of the group had to guess its [Pashto](#) counterpart. It entertained him to see Rabia winning, but pretending to guess the right answer only on her fourth or fifth attempt.

The families reached the village just as the sun was setting. It was time to perform the [maghrib](#) prayer, followed by [isha](#). With the afternoon’s heavy meal and the other events, the night provided a deep and restful sleep.

When morning broke, Ejaz arrived at Abdul Latif’s house to chat with his aunt. Abdul Latif had gone back to sleep after [fajr](#) but Razya was awake, preparing breakfast.

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#), Aunt Razya,” greeted Ejaz.

“[Wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#), Ejaz. Not breakfasting with Hinna this morning? Did you fight with her?” she teased. Dismissing the humor, he launched into his task.

“Aunt Razya. I wanted to talk to you about Sikander.”

“Oh? What’s *he* done?”

“Done? No, nothing like that. I just... I don’t know if you’ve considered this, but don’t you think he might be a good match for Rabia?”

Razya pretended nonchalance. “I suppose they *could* be a match,” she responded as she slapped another [paratthha](#) on her tawa. “But how would *you* feel about it, Ejaz?”

“I think you can see how I feel.”

“Hm. And Sikander?”

“I was with Sikander all the way to Qandahar. I spent nearly two months with him. I saw how he took poor Usman under his care and I’ve seen how —,”

“Yes, yes, Ejaz, that’s all fine, but tell me, have you seen or learned what he thinks of Rabia? Has he *told* you what he thinks of her?”

“When we were going into Qandahar, he let me know how he felt but he truthfully couldn’t be sure.” *I like that kind of honesty*, mused Ejaz before continuing. “But, Aunt Razya, *I’m* sure now. It would be perfect if you came up with the idea and approached my mother. She would, of course, consult with me. I’d take the appropriate day or so to think about it before agreeing.”

“And what about Rabia? Don’t you need her to agree?”

“Huh! More than you imagine.”

Distracted from her [paratthhas](#), Razya directed an intrigued frown at Ejaz.

“Well, yes. Look, I wanted to marry Hinna, but not just on the say-so of her parents. She had to agree, and huh! [Alhamdulillah](#), she did. Why wouldn’t I want the same for Rabia? I know it’s not been our way in the past, but sisters or daughters aren’t livestock. We can’t treat them that way, especially if we claim to be Muslims.”

“Yes.” Razya sighed, wearing a cynical smile. She had time and again seen girls literally being sold to settle their fathers’ debts or in payment of a gambling obligation or simply handed over in the time-honored fashion of [swara](#). Afghanistan might be a Muslim country, but that didn’t mean that the Muslims there, or anywhere else for that matter, could separate tribal custom from religion. “For what it’s worth, Ejaz, I agree with you. Besides, it *is* one of Allah’s blessings to assist a man and a woman to find each other in marriage. I’ll explore the idea with Noor, but before I make it a formal request will you confirm Sikander’s interest?”

Ejaz agreed, though he had no doubt about Sikander. He thanked his aunt and with the conspiracy launched, he returned home, Razya returned to her breakfast preparations, and in an adjacent room Sikander rolled over, smiling, before returning to snooze for another hour.

Later that day, Razya went to borrow a cup of red lentils from Noor. As she poured them into a small bag, she made her pitch. Noor took a few moments to absorb the idea before posing the anticipated questions.

“I could accept it, Sister, but what about Ejaz? His consent’s important.”

“Yes, of course, I can’t imagine proceeding without it. Let’s hope he’s favorable. Not to mention Rabia herself.”

“Rabia, you can leave to me,” offered Noor. “I’ll talk to her after you speak to Ejaz.”

Razya agreed and the two women parted. Each believed she was doing something noble.

As the extended family regrouped for the evening meal, Razya got the nod from Ejaz that Sikander seemed to be willing, triggering Razya’s confirmation, made in a quiet corner to Noor, of Ejaz’s assured consent. Noor was thus cleared to speak to Rabia, but in keeping with Hinna’s full rights as the wife of Ejaz, she, too, needed to be in on things. Since Hinna and Rabia had an excellent relationship, Noor saw an opportunity to tackle both questions by asking Hinna for her opinion, and to broach the subject with Rabia.

Later that same evening when Abdul Latif, his family, Sikander, and Usman left to go home, Noor approached Hinna.

“I’d like to discuss something.”

“[Adey](#)?” responded Hinna with appropriate [Pashto](#) respect.

“Hinna, Rabia’s almost seventeen, as you know, and should really have been spoken for by now but...well this accursed war...” Noor fumbled over the words with a nervous chuckle.

“Yes, I’ve wondered about that too. [Adey](#), have you thought about Sikander?”

Noor studied Hinna for a moment. “Yes. Yes, Sikander, for example.” Her suspicion grew. “Do you think that would be a good match, Hinna?”

“I think so. I talk to Rabia a lot and I think she might be willing to marry him. I know they often argue but it’s really in good humor.”

“Yes, I notice it too, but she’s only seventeen, Hinna, and a girl of that age, well...” With a suspended shrug, Noor rolled her eyes in mock weariness, wearing a tight-lipped smile.

“Perhaps if I talk to her?” Hinna replied.

Noor pretended unawareness of what she was now certain was going on and agreed that Hinna’s talking to Rabia might be a good next step.

It took only as long as the next encounter between the two young women, and with Rabia, only a direct approach would do.

“Rabia, what do you make of Sikander?”

“How do you mean?”

“I think you know how I mean.”

Succumbing to a rare blush Rabia stumbled through her answer. “He’s...well, he’s exotic, I think. You know? From Peshawar? He can be an annoying tease at times but he’s also very caring. Huh! I wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t come into the water after me. He’s...”

“Yes, Rabia?”

“He’s—Hinna, why are you asking?”

“[Aba’i](#) mentioned to me that you...you might be interested perhaps, in his marriage proposal?”

Rabia blushed again.

“Nothing formal’s been discussed, mind you, but there seems to be some interest. Rabia, it’s an excellent match don’t you think?”

Rabia looked down and smiled, conveying all that was needed.

The way was clear for Noor to ask more formally. Listening dutifully, Rabia accepted. Noor “broke” the news to Ejaz. Ejaz pretended to deliberate for about an hour before pronouncing his agreement and that Razya and Abdul Latif should in turn be asked to present it to Sikander. The “dance” went on for another day, by which time all parties agreed to an outcome that both Sikander and Rabia had hoped for all along. Yet cultural mores demanded proper protocol be followed and in the end everyone was satisfied. But there was a wrinkle.

Sikander was sitting on the floor in Abdul Latif’s main living room cleaning his Kalashnikov and lost in anticipation of becoming Rabia’s husband when Abdul Latif walked in after chatting with Razya.

“Sikander?” he asked. “You’re proposing to get married to Rabia, and that would certainly be a blessed match, but you haven’t discussed this with your parents. It doesn’t seem right that you’d take such a step without their approval.”

“I know, I know.” Assuming a worried look, Sikander directed extra attention to his gun, avoiding eye contact with his mentor. He paused for a moment before asking, “Brother Abdul Latif, if I’m making decisions about taking other lives in a time of war, shouldn’t I be allowed to make a decision about my own?”

“Hm!” Abdul Latif smiled. “Well, I’m not sure it’s *that* simple. I mean, I certainly understand what you’re saying, but are you simply reflecting the inconvenience of asking your parents or do you truly feel there’s no need? Wouldn’t you also be making a decision about *their* lives? Or are you so divorced from them that it doesn’t matter?”

“Brother Abdul Latif, I’m sure they respect my judgment. They’ve been supportive of what I’m doing here, so—”

“We still have supply runs between here and Peshawar. I can arrange for a letter to get to your parents if you wish. I can even arrange it so that they can get one back to you. Do you want me to do that, Sikander?”

Hesitantly, Sikander acknowledged that this was probably not a bad idea. He might have been wise beyond his years but hormones were hormones and it wasn’t easy to overcome the urge to proceed headlong toward a legitimate union with Rabia.

“[W’Allahi!](#)” proclaimed Abdul Latif. “I’ll arrange it then. The whole thing will probably take no more than a couple of weeks. Can you, um...wait that long?”

Sikander’s looked up, embarrassed, as the smirk on Abdul Latif’s face quickly spread into his signature grin.

A couple of days later, some men were about to leave for Peshawar to sell captured weapons and return with a variety of supplies. Sikander’s letter was already written. Along with inquiries as to everyone’s wellbeing, Sikander wrote about the family in Laghar Juy, his wish to marry Rabia, and his desire for his parents’ permission and blessings.

Less than two weeks later, the response came. Expectantly, Sikander read:

Dear Sikander [Bettha](#),

[Assalaamu ‘alaykum!](#) We are all well here and our hopes and prayers are that Almighty Allah continues to deliver good health and protection to you.

We received your letter, which came to us from a Pakistan Army captain who said some Afghans that had come from the village where you are, had delivered it. He would not name the location but that doesn’t matter right now.

Sikander, we will not have the opportunity to talk to you in depth, but we are grateful to Allah for allowing this way of reaching you on this occasion. As your father, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that I unleashed my frustrations on you when I did. Please know that when you left, it upset us very much. We were so worried we called the police. It didn’t do much good and it seemed all our lives had come to an abrupt end. A few days later, however, at about the time we learned you were going to fight in the path of Allah, we found that our problems were becoming almost too easy to solve and before long we were given a large piece of business by the Pakistan Army. They even made advance payments, which greatly helped our situation, [alhamdulillah!](#)

That change in our fortunes has continued, by the grace of Allah, and we believe that your choice to fight [fi-sabeelillah](#) is the reason.

Looking up from the letter, Sikander smiled and shook his head, muttering “Junaid!” before continuing.

So you have found someone you want to marry. As Allah has seen fit to send you in his path to fight, we must believe that it is his will that you should meet such a girl. Sikander, we’re impressed with your commitment, and know you must be in the company of equally committed people who are willing to risk their lives [fi-sabeelillah](#).

We trust completely in Almighty Allah and your mother and I give you our wholehearted blessings. As a token of this, we have put together some things and are sending them with the captain, who promised to send them along to you. We hope everyone will be pleased with our gifts.

Our prayers are with you, Sikander. Do what Allah guides you toward and do it with honesty. We pray you will be with us again and that we can also meet our new daughter-in-law very soon. We love you, [bettha!](#)

[Allah Hafiz,](#)

Your ever-loving father and mother

Sikander dropped the letter on his lap. He was elated. It was more than simply the permission he had received. The family’s situation had finally abated, and better fortune was now coming their way. He longed to be home.

“There was also this.” Interrupting his thoughts came the voice of Abdul Latif. Sikander wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. He turned around to see a large package lying on the floor. It was wrapped up and sealed with packing tape. Understanding what it was from the letter, Sikander felt he should give charge of it to Razya. He was, after all, still a guest at her house.

Razya’s role as the surrogate for Sikander’s mother was not lost on her. She accepted the task eagerly. Carefully opening the parcel, she laid the items out on her [durree](#). There was a box of glass and gold bangles, a red embroidered silk [lehenga](#) skirt and bodice, four gold jewelry sets of different levels of expense, two pairs of ladies’ size seven shoes, three lengths of embroidered silk, a [sherwani](#) jacket, seven men’s [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#) combinations, a pair of decorated cream-colored [khussas](#), and a man’s silver and gold ring. There were also three recent photographs of Sikander’s family.

To each item was taped a small piece of paper on which was written either a name or a relationship. Sikander was to receive the [sherwani](#), the [khussas](#), and a [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#) suit. The other [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#) suits were to be distributed to Abdul Latif, his sons, nephews, and Usman. The simpler jewelry sets were to go to Razya, Noor, and Hinna, along with the lengths of embroidered silk for conversion into [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#) suits for the women. Everything else was for Rabia.

Having determined the rightful recipient of each item, Razya tidily set it all aside to be delivered later. With Abdul Latif’s objection now happily addressed, the engagement could proceed unimpeded.

From Razya came a formal appeal to Ejaz as head of the household to ask for Rabia’s hand for Sikander. Equally formally, Ejaz agreed on condition of acceptance by his mother and Rabia herself. When he reported back that this was indeed the case, the engagement was sealed with exchanges of gifts. Rabia, finally, was to become Rabia Sikander [Khan](#) at some point in the not too distant future.

Excited at the prospect of becoming a bride, Rabia handled her new status well, especially as it had suddenly showered her with attention and gifts from Sikander's evidently well-to-do and exotic parents. But along with the excitement, like an ever-present counterweight, came the anxiety of separation from the home that had been hers for all her seventeen years.

For the next few months, the women of the extended family busily made preparations for the wedding. Between them, Razya and Noor had negotiated the end of March 1988 as the ideal date. It would be after the worst of the winter and before [Ramadhan](#), leaving plenty of time for celebrations before settling in for a month of fasting. Until then, everyone would be busy with planting and harvesting before winter was upon them.

While they were only engaged, Rabia and Sikander kept their proper distances from each other as any interaction now would be considered improper without at least another family member present, preferably either her mother or Razya. Their conversations became stiffer and less familiar. Sometimes, however, circumstances created situations when the two were alone and able to steal a conversation from under the nose of culture.

Less than a week after the engagement, Abdul Latif and Razya were in Anarbagh for the day to meet a cousin of Razya's to organize embroidery work for some of the wedding clothes. Having let this fact slip from her mind, Noor sent Rabia to Razya's house to borrow some flour. Sikander and Usman were seated on the floor engrossed in a rudimentary game of chess improvised from small, carved pieces of wood and a checkerboard pattern on the [durree](#). They had learned the game with Irfan and Saleem in Scotland. In their noiseless concentration, neither of them noticed Rabia come in through the open doorway, expecting to find Razya. She, likewise, failed to notice them.

Aunt Razya won't mind me taking a few kilos of flour, she assured herself as she gingerly proceeded to fill the bag she had brought. As she turned to leave, out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Sikander and Usman. At the same time, the weight of the bag and her struggle with it betrayed her presence.

"Sikander," she uttered.

Having already broken his concentration, Sikander stared at his fiancée holding the heavy sack. "Rabia? What are *you* doing here?"

"Oh, I...needed to borrow some flour," she answered, flicking a glance at the bag.

"I see," said Sikander, wondering how to prolong the conversation. "I—" he paused and looked at Usman. Not waiting for a response, Usman swiftly acted on his own offer to withdraw to a different room.

"I don't suppose Sister Razya would mind," offered Sikander meaninglessly. It bought him a few seconds to come up with a more intelligent comment. Rabia's rolling eyes declared her awareness of the fumbling obviousness of Sikander's words. She remained, however, awaiting something meaningful.

"I...um, hope you liked the gifts that my family sent across," he offered.

"Yes, they're beautiful. I was surprised at the way the shoes—Sikander...how did you know my size?" The issue hadn't registered with her previously.

"I didn't. My mother probably guessed and expected that we'd let her know somehow if the shoes didn't fit." He shrugged. "What about the [lehenga](#) suit and the jewelry?"

"Just beautiful. I never saw anything like that [lehenga](#). But I haven't tried it on yet. It didn't seem appropriate."

"Oh?" asked Sikander, surprised.

Now Rabia wore the nervous smile. "Well. You know," she shrugged. "It's a wedding outfit, so I wouldn't want to try it on just—"

"Actually, Rabia, it's just for the engagement, I think."

Rabia's face lost some of its tension as she immersed herself in the warmth of Sikander's spirit. She gave in to a smile but then, realizing that the awkwardness of the moment could become a problem she bid him [salaam](#) and began walking out.

Sikander was smitten. He was not in any doubt now about the pleasurable heartache reported by Ejaz and wondered how he would manage without his fiancée for so long. But he quickly checked himself from drifting off in the face of the more immediate need.

"Rabia, let me get that for you." He hurried toward her and reached out his hand.

Rabia's smile acquired an extra creasing of her eyes as she willingly handed him the bag. Stepping to one side, she gestured, with a ceremonious wave of her arm, for him to lead the way. To preserve decorum, Sikander took the bag within a dozen meters of Noor's house, handed it to Rabia, and walked back to Razya's place, turning his head once or twice to steal more glances of his fiancée's departing form while he could.

Sikander's feelings of lovesickness were partially assuaged whenever family gatherings took place, and even though he was only able to converse less intimately, just being able to see Rabia was satisfying. Sensibilities about avoiding an incident were serious, however, and the family had to maintain propriety in such matters or risk considerable loss of prestige in a scandal.

One thing Sikander *could* do, provided a senior member of the family was present, was to continue to teach Rabia common English words and phrases. She had always been an attentive pupil, but now she found a new sense of commitment to him. The idea of learning what he wanted to teach her, made her feel she would be a true partner in his life and that failing that, she might lose him. Perhaps it was her vivaciousness and dedication to building that life together. Perhaps it was even an anxiety of being without a husband, after witnessing her recently widowed mother undergo the anguish and torment of widowhood. A husband could be gone without warning in any number of ways. If playing her part to help the two of them prosper meant pleasing him by learning English, she would give it her all for that reason alone, quite aside from her own considerable appetite for the language.

With the harvesting season and poppy planting in October, Sikander was not challenged to be busy. During this time, he grew closer to Usman, who continued opening up to him. They loved to play chess and Usman had assembled an increasingly formidable repertoire of opening moves that often confounded Sikander. Inaccurately, Sikander put his elevated loss rate down to being distracted by thoughts of Rabia.

The winter of 1987 set in and unexpectedly turned out to be bloodier than in past years. Ordinarily, the season would see the fighting taken down several notches and the weather would allow the [mujahideen](#) to regroup, while preventing serious losses for the [DRA](#) and Soviet forces. However, that year, based on enemy losses during the spring and summer and the Soviets' now stated aim of withdrawal, the [mujahideen](#) commanders, Hekmatyar, Khalis, Haqqani, and Massoud, were convinced that concerted pressure applied via ambushes would force the Soviets to exit their country once and for all. For the rank-and-file soldiers there was little left to fight and die for, so there was no question of provoking the [mujahideen](#). But the focus of [mujahideen](#) efforts was to step up monitoring of troop movements in readiness for ambush. This meant fielding a continuous presence in some of the more strategic locations and men were rotated in and out of the cold mountain country for that purpose. With only occasional skirmishes, however, there was no meaningful impact on Soviet plans. Sikander remained undeployed out of concern for his groom-in-waiting status and the strong desire on everyone's part to avoid exposing Rabia's fiancé to unnecessary risk.

March finally came. Preparations for the wedding had been at an almost frenzied level for over a month. Sikander's needs as groom were well

handled by Abdul Latif and his family, including his now close friend Usman, while Noor and Hinna made their demands on Ejaz and Saleem to perform whatever errands the women declared necessary for a perfect wedding.

The wedding proceeded with much ceremony. Abdul Latif's family was the surrogate for the groom's and as he was a [jirga](#) elder In Laghar Juy, that counted for something. The gifts from Sikander's parents were put to use adorning the family members. Although disappointed by the absence of his own family, Sikander understood that it was simply circumstance.

For her part, Rabia—always an avid consumer of new experiences—could not have been more enthralled. In truth, her pleasure didn't simply stem from being the very beautiful focus of attention. That was, of course, a given. It was something else and it was true for everyone else, too. A wedding was a consummately optimistic act. With all the progress that had been made against the Soviet occupation, a new dawn seemed finally to be breaking. A new era of optimism was being ushered in and people were willing to reflect its promise of a positive impact on their lives. The wedding underscored these sentiments, evoking in everyone a sense of joy that reached far beyond the confines of the ceremony.

But for Rabia and Sikander it was simply love. The wedding having taken place, they could now freely express that love in all the beautiful ways that Allah had enabled.



Chapter 10

Home

LIKE AN EXCEPTIONALLY thoughtful wedding present, the best gift of all came from Switzerland. On April 14, 1988, less than a month after the wedding and a few days before [Ramadhan](#), with the United States and the Soviet Union as guarantors, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed the Geneva Accords. All parties accepted several provisions, but chief among them was a Soviet timetable for a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan to begin the following month and end on February 15, 1989.

Everyone was overjoyed at the news, filled with expectations of a new norm for the country—one that might recall the more peaceful days of King Mohammed Zahir Shah's Afghanistan. What would unfold was clear to no one, but it surely had to be better than the last nine years. With this in mind, Sikander and Rabia determined that it was time to make a move.

Custom dictated that the bride move in with the groom's family. For Rabia this was barely a challenge. It was only fifty meters from her mother's place, which was in any case, increasingly bearing the hallmarks of Hinna's gentle hand. Now, going home meant returning to Razya's place and visiting meant going to see her mother, brothers, and sister-in-law.

Obviously, however, this arrangement was just a substitute for the one that lay over the mountains back in Hayatabad. The war was essentially won and Russia's puppet, Najibullah, would no doubt be toppled soon, so there was no better opportunity for Sikander and Rabia to establish their life where it belonged—in Peshawar.

On the morning of April 15, in celebration of the announcement of the coming end of the Soviet occupation—news of which had taken barely a day to reach the villages—Razia invited Noor's family for breakfast. Abdul Majeed and Abdul Rahman couldn't join them. They were away on a mine-clearing mission near the village of Hindrani, a few kilometers from Laghar Juy and were spending the night there.

In splendor, Hinna and Rabia laid out breakfast of [halwa](#), [pooree](#), and spiced chickpeas on the [durree](#), before sitting beside their husbands.

"Brother Abdul Latif," began Sikander, "I've been thinking that with the Russians leaving we can consider living a different way now, one that reflects that the war is over, and that we've turned our backs on that brutal life."

"Very well put, Sikander. Our warrior poet!" Abdul Latif remarked.

"I've decided it's time to go back to Pakistan with Rabia as soon as possible," continued Sikander. While he still had time before his pronouncement could fully register with everyone, he launched immediately into his rationale. "It's been nearly two years since I left home and I really want to see my parents and brother and sister. Rabia needs to be introduced to them, too. They haven't even seen her picture."

This was in-law territory. There was no way the subject would be easy. Everyone knew the matter would come up sooner or later, but it was upon them now and no one had an adequate response. The silence filling the room demanded Sikander continue.

"I can't thank you and your gracious family enough for all you've done. You've opened my eyes to a world I would never have been aware of. So, Brother Abdul Latif, as you've been the one to welcome me into your home, I...I'm requesting your permission and that of Sister Razya for Rabia and myself to take your leave and go to Pakistan." Sikander heaved a sigh. He had finally opened the discussion.

Abdul Latif sat deep in thought before answering. "Sikander, I...I don't know what to say. We've been proud to consider you a part of our family and we will—so long as I have breath in my body—always call you a son. I suppose I understand the need for you to return to Peshawar but—"

"You've always been a pleasure to have around, Sikander." Razya interrupted. "I've enjoyed your wise words and your courage to fight for what you believe in. It makes me feel no matter where you'll be, you...you'll always be with us. With Rabia by your side, we will always be with you, and we know you'll be there for her. So please, go with all our blessings for both of you."

Rabia directed an anxious stare at Noor while her brothers and Hinna studied her intently.

Having dropped the first bomb, Sikander had little to lose now in dropping the second. "We'd ideally like to be there in time for the start of [Ramadhan](#)."

"[Ramadhan](#)!?" Multiple voices sprang forth in incredulity.

"Well, yes," replied Sikander.

"That means you'd have to leave...tomorrow!?" said Abdul Latif.

Noor, whose head had hung low since the start of the conversation, allowed herself to meet Rabia's pained, apologetic gaze. The swelling body of liquid in Noor's eyes ran out of space, trickling down her face. Yes, she had given her daughter to this adopted son of Abdul Latif. Yes, one day he would no doubt return to Pakistan. But the victory now being savored by her people was to be the very cause of the departure of her daughter, her baby, from her daily life.

"[Adey](#)," Rabia uttered, intending quiet reassurance as she watched her mother's emotions unfold. Rabia understood the expression she was witnessing—it was primal; woven into her mother from the day her mother had been born, activated the day Rabia had been born, but held in reserve for this very moment.

"[Adey](#)!" Rabia broke down sobbing on her mother's shoulder. It was a down payment for an emotionally expensive departure. Not that she wanted to stay—she was keen to go with Sikander.

"We'll take you there," Abdul Latif said, shifting to the matter of "how" from weightier questions of "if" and "when," both of which seemed to have been resolved by the look in Sikander's eyes and, curiously enough, thought Abdul Latif, in Rabia's. No one could hold it against Sikander to want to return. And Rabia? Well, she was now his wife.

"We'll go too," chimed in Ejaz, "Hinna and I can spend some time with her family."

"Very well. We'll also need you, Saleem. You can drive once we pick up the Pajero."

On their return that evening, Abdul Rahman and Abdul Majeed were equally despondent at learning of the imminent departure of their [mujahid](#) brother, and they, together with Usman spent much of the night chatting about their experiences and how they would always remain "brothers."

With hardly a moment's sleep behind them, the travelers were ready to leave immediately following [fajr](#) the next morning, after more tearfully resigned farewells. The newlyweds, together with Abdul Latif, Ejaz, Hinna, and Saleem set off toward Takhto [Kalay](#), each riding a mule with two more in tow carrying provisions and gifts intended for Hinna and Sikander's families.

Given the subdued hostilities, they were able to travel without concern, and were in Takhto before noon. Azam and his family extended the usual welcome, which Abdul Latif repaid by delivering a few gifts of clothing for Azam's wife from Razya. After lunch, they pressed on, so that by early afternoon the group had already passed Showlghar and Chenar.

Throughout the afternoon, Hinna visibly displayed her anticipation as she neared her maternal home as much as Rabia, meanwhile, grew anxious at

leaving hers behind. This was not lost on either of them as they chatted along the way atop their mules, whenever the terrain was smooth enough to permit conversation.

“I’ve no idea how I’ll adapt to Sikander’s family. What if I make mistakes or they don’t like my habits?” Rabia asked. “Hinna, didn’t *you* have the same thoughts when you were first coming to Laghar Juy?”

“Hah! I did!” Hinna laughed. “Some of the things I’d imagined were truly idiotic, though!” she continued. “I suppose it’s natural when you think about it, a new bride moving to her in-law’s family. But knowing my mother-in-law must have gone through the same experiences, did help.”

“Yes, but do you think that by the time we enter our new families they still remember when they entered theirs?”

“Who can say, but why not remind them?”

“How?”

“Oh, sometimes I’d see that your mother had a moment to chat and I’d ask her how it felt when she first moved into your grandmother’s home. The answer almost didn’t matter. Once her mind was taken there, she’d usually be willing to see my own situation with more understanding.”

“Hm... Sounds like a good approach. Did you get that from your mother?” inquired Rabia, wondering how her own mother could have shortchanged her on such advice.

“Not all of it, Rabia. But you know, there’ll be times when you’ll do things so alien to Sikander’s mother that she’ll want to teach you *their* family’s way and it might not actually be any better. It probably won’t be something serious or important but somehow, I don’t know, I guess it’s all the little things that make us who we are, and when they have to be different for no apparent reason, well, they’re the hardest to change.”

“So how did you handle that?” Rabia needed every ounce of value she could extract from her mentor’s evident wisdom.

“Different ways. I’m sure I haven’t finished. Don’t forget though, it matters to me that you have a warm and loving family. The effort to be a part of it is worth it.”

“That’s kind of you to say, Hinna.” Rabia continued, impressed by Hinna’s depth. “I had no idea you were so well prepared for this sort of thing!” They laughed.

As the lightheartedness wore off, Rabia’s thoughts drifted once more to being separated from her family. In an effort to distract herself, she considered how lucky Ejaz had been to have stumbled upon such a treasure as Hinna. Knowing she would spend more of Hinna’s seemingly limitless patience and wearing a mischievous grin, she probed. “Hinna, what about Ejaz? Are you pleased with my big brother?”

Hinna lowered her gaze—her mule had no need of her vision at this moment—and smiled. It was Rabia’s cue to scale back the questioning.

The question, however, did launch myriad thoughts in Hinna. She had found a loving, considerate, and courageous person who had stepped up to be the family’s father figure after his own had passed away. He’d been burdened in a very real way by the legacy of his father’s martyrdom and met the challenge in whatever way he could. He’d been sensitive to Noor’s situation as a widow. Hinna admired him for all those things but also for the way he quietly and privately cared for her, his wife of just a year. Though she hadn’t let on as yet and it would be another three weeks before she could be certain, she believed that she might be expecting their first child.

About an hour before sunset, they were in the approaches to Hinna’s home village. Long mountain shadows painted the plain as the travelers approached her home. Finally, just before dark, they were at Yaqub’s door as the household spilled out in commotion upon learning who had arrived.

After the usual welcoming hugs, greetings, and light refreshments, gifts were unpacked and presented to the family. Like many rural families, Yaqub’s maintained a small stock of typically homemade items that could readily be given as gifts in case the need arose with unannounced guests. Abdul Latif and Sikander were each handed a few such items while a one-thousand rupee note was thrust ceremoniously into Rabia’s hand.

As the travelers began to unwind for the end of the day, Hinna felt beyond happy, her face displaying to Rabia a previously unseen level of contentment. She was back—back among her parents and siblings. *The real Hinna*, thought Rabia. Directing her attention to Ejaz, she could see more clearly what had assailed her brother’s heart upon first laying eyes on his wife. Rabia couldn’t help drawing comparisons between her situation and Hinna’s and knowing that she and her friend would soon be parting simply amplified her nervousness about settling in with Sikander’s family.

With their unpacking complete, Ejaz and Hinna had now become hosts for the rest of them. The next morning, Hinna proudly prepared breakfast, serving [nihari](#), [paratthha](#), and a semolina [halwa](#). It was a substantial meal for the four remaining travelers.

With breakfast behind them, it was time to depart. It would be unwise to allow the day to get ahead of them. If they were lucky enough to arrive with plenty of spare daylight and to find the Pajero at the staging house near the Torkhum Road, they would continue on to Jamrud directly. Although it wasn’t far, the rough going would make nighttime travel unwise and that would force them to spend the night in the staging house, a decidedly less attractive option than Arif’s place.

The mules were re-packed and the time for farewell [salaams](#) was upon them. The girls hugged with heavy hearts. Rabia’s sentiments were all the more acute from losing Hinna’s valued company. She wiped her face with her [dupattha](#) before turning finally to Ejaz. A calm force, Ejaz could handle himself as well as many and better than most [mujahideen](#). He was tough and battle hardened, not given to outbursts or displays of emotion. Yet in seeing his little sister now ready to leave, he too was reduced to weeping. Passing the palm of his hand over her head in a fatherly blessing, as she cried, Ejaz buried her head in his chest and arms. He was her brother, her protector, and together with her uncle, was a source of solace as both men had done their best to prevent Rabia from feeling the full pain of losing her father.

Abdul Latif and Saleem looked on, struggling with their own composure from this foretaste of soon to be leaving behind an only niece and sister. But to Abdul Latif seasoned sensibilities, this was the way of the world. There wasn’t much that anyone could do about it. The charged atmosphere was not lost on Sikander. Completing his own hugging and [salaams](#), it was all he could do to absorb the pangs of guilt from being an agent of such anguish.

The travelers rode off, making frequent rearward glances and waving to the family standing outside Yaqub’s home. Eventually they made it to the edge of the plain and began climbing up to the northeast, taking the switchback trails over the ridge into the valley leading to the Khyber Pass and the Torkhum Road. By early evening, not saying much of anything on the way, they reached their familiar stopping point. When they arrived, there was a group of [mujahideen](#) heading back over the mountains to Khost awaiting any travelers who might be coming in from the west with more mules. Sikander saw the Pajero outside, well worn and as dirty as ever. He warmed to it like an old friend.

The vehicle took the switchbacks with ease, delivering significantly more comfort to its occupants than the otherwise loyal mules had been able to do. This was Rabia’s first ride in any automobile since her father, a much better driver than Abdul Latif, had taken his family in a fellow [mujahideen](#) commander’s captured old GAZ-69. She had been eleven at the time and from what she could remember, there was no comparison with this air-conditioned vehicle, though it did reek of the [charss](#) that was so widely smoked in these parts.

They were at Arif’s place in short order. Abdul Latif stepped out of the vehicle and struck his crusty fist on the metal gate at the back of the house to announce his presence. Abdullah, Arif’s housekeeper, trotted out scraping his flip-flops over the brick patio. He recognized Abdul Latif and duly let the

Pajero back into its home, explaining that Arif was away and would be returning shortly. Everyone entered the house.

This was not an evening for discussions of war or other planning in the basement. Abdullah showed them into Arif's well-appointed living room. In the middle was the large Persian rug with its striking [gumbad](#) design, familiar to Sikander from his past phone calls. Rabia studied its pattern, thinking of Hinna, the accomplished rug weaver, and feeling the emptiness of her absence.

Abdullah offered light refreshment as the four of them took their seats. Rabia absorbed the visually splendid setting of Arif's living room. Her head swiveled as she mentally noted the fabric of the drapes, the items of small furniture dotted around the room, and the bookcase against the wall in front of her, flanked by two evocative [Gulgees](#), though of course she knew nothing of their value nor of the fame of their creator.

Twenty minutes passed before the sounds of another vehicle, its horn, and the grease-hungry gate swinging open were heard. Moments later, as Arif Saiduddin strolled into the room his face brightened upon seeing his unexpected guests.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatullahi wa-barakaatuhu](#), Brother Abdul Latif! This *is* a surprise! What brings you here this evening? I had no word you were coming." Arif's enthusiastic demeanor abruptly gave way to a frown. He began imagining the failings in procedures that must have been responsible for this unacceptable lapse. Abdul Latif briefly entertained himself with Arif's boyish nonsense before letting him know the purpose of their visit on this occasion.

Arif's beaming eyes danced between Sikander and Rabia as Abdul Latif elaborated. When the explanation was over, a delighted Arif rose up from his seat.

"First of all, [Ramadhan Mubarak](#) to everyone. And to Sikander and Rabia, may you have [barakah](#) and [inshaAllah](#), a long and happy life together. Ameen!" he said.

"[JazaakAllah](#)." Sikander's replied graciously.

"All right, you're here now and we should organize a special welcome under the circumstances, don't you agree, Sikander?" Sikander made the customary plea for nothing special to be prepared and the customary apology for arriving unannounced.

"Oh, that's all right. It's really nothing," countered Arif. "So, Sikander, another call home perhaps?"

"That *would* be very kind of you," replied Sikander. "We'd like to prepare our family for our arrival tomorrow, [inshaAllah](#)."

"Yes, of course! Let's do that after dinner and [isha](#), shall we? I'm sure your family will have plenty of time tomorrow morning to make all the necessary preparations for their new [bahu](#)!" said Arif.

"Brother Arif, would it be possible to take the Pajero tomorrow?" Abdul Latif inquired. "

"[W'Allahi](#), brother, you shame me by even asking. The vehicle and a driver will be yours for tomorrow, and let me know when you want me to make mule arrangements for your return home."

"You're a kind man and you'll be remembered for all you've done for our resistance," responded Abdul Latif, "and [inshaAllah](#), your reward will be in heaven."

The travelers ate dinner, prayed [isha](#), and when all the food had been cleared, everyone except Rabia and Sikander went downstairs to Arif's large meeting room.

Sikander picked up the phone and dialed. Javed was the one to answer.

"Hello?"

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum, Abba-jee!](#)"

"Sikander? Sofie, come here; Sikander's on the phone. He must be back in Pakistan!"

"I'm actually not far from home, [Abba-jee](#), and I received your message and all the wonderful gifts and—"

"[Betha](#), when are you coming? Did the wedding take place? Is our [bahu](#) with you? Is she there?"

Javed was barely able to contain his questions. Sofie's footfalls over their marble floor grew more audible and hurried as she approached the phone.

Javed handed the phone to his wife.

"Sikander [betha](#)?" Sofie ventured, her voice quivering.

"Yes, [Ammee-jan](#), it's me. I'm back. I'm coming home. *We're* coming home!"

Sofie struggled. She could neither speak nor hide her condition. Sikander waited, choosing to allow the silence to do its job. Finally, she said, "Sikander, [betha](#), we've waited *so* long for those words. Where are you? When will you be here? Did you receive what we sent you, and what about Rabia? Where's my [bahu](#)?"

"[Ammee](#), here...s peak to Rabia." Sikander motioned to Rabia to approach and and take the handset.

"Rabia?" came the voice over the line in as gentle and inviting a manner as Sofie could find.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum, Adey](#)," responded Rabia, struggling to acquaint herself with holding a phone.

Recognizing the cue, Sofie switched to [Pashto](#). "Rabia, [n'zhowr](#)! How are you? How is Sikander treating you? Does he look after you? Oh, I'm so impatient to... I'm so—" Unable to continue, she handed the phone back to Javed. Rabia did the same for Sikander.

"Rabia?" asked Javed.

"No [Abba](#), it's me. [InshaAllah](#) we plan to be home tomorrow by mid-afternoon.

"[Abba](#), we did it with the Russians. They're finally leaving! This was what we talked about at school and now it's actually happening!"

"It's hard to tell you what I feel right now, [betha](#). [Alhamdulillah](#)! Allah guided you to answer his call and you took it. I know your education was important, but it can be resumed. I'm so proud of you. I...I just can't wait to see—" Javed was overwhelmed.

Sikander waited before softly saying his [salaams](#) and cradling the phone. He turned to Rabia as she stared at the floor.

"What is it?"

Making no reply, Rabia merely shook her head, engrossed in recollections of everyone back in Laghar Juy and although taken by the obvious warmth of Sikander's parents, along with Sikander's own love, she would soon be losing the last remaining thread of connection to her family with the departure of her uncle and brother. Patiently, Sikander took her to rejoin Abdul Latif, Saleem, and Arif.

An hour and a half before sunrise, everyone arose for the pre-dawn meal of [suhur](#) to start the first fast of [Ramadhan](#). Despite being free to suspend fasting as travelers, Abdul Latif, Saleem and Sikander elected to fast anyway. As Rabia had been in her monthly cycle for the past five days, fasting or praying were not permitted. She would have to make up for the lost days after [Ramadhan](#) was over. Rabia did, however, discreetly join her husband for the [suhur](#). After the meal, she would simply avoid the fasting [niyyah](#) normally uttered prior to fasting each day.

They filed into the dining room, where Abdullah had laid out a sumptuous spread. Rabia's face lit up as she marveled at the beautiful way the food had been presented along with its appetizing aroma. Part of her was once more cataloging Arif's fascinating home with a view to emulating aspects of it at some time or other in her own future nest.

Those that needed to, quietly and privately declared their fasting [niyyah](#) and everyone went back to sleep until mid morning. Once awake again, they busied themselves preparing for the final leg of the trip—the ride home. After [zuhr](#), Rabia and Sikander wanted to dress appropriately for the homecoming. Whatever was needed was removed from the Pajero before it was re-packed and everyone finally piled in. Thankfully, Saleem would not be driving now that Arif's driver, Zaffer, was at their disposal.

Before long, the vehicle was heading down Lalazar Avenue toward the Zarghooni [masjid](#). Seeing its approaching minarets unleashed a flood of memories in Sikander, goading his heart to a faster pace. He was almost home. His head swiveling right and left, Sikander strained to discern any meaningful changes in the neighborhoods he had called home until almost two years ago.

The streets are a little quieter, he reflected, before recalling that the slightly slower pace of life during [Ramadhan](#) might be sufficient explanation. On Lalazar Avenue, as they passed the Zarghooni, the [asr azaan](#) began booming from its bullhorn loudspeakers. Minutes later, Zaffer brought the Pajero into J-block and pulled up to the black metal gate of Sikander's home.

The gate swung open almost immediately after Zaffer sounded the horn. Jamil was there to welcome them and as soon as the vehicle came to rest inside the covered carport, Sikander hopped out to greet his elated brother.

"Jameeeel!" he cried, hugging him warmly.

Initially overwhelmed, Jamil was finally able to utter "[Bhai-jan](#)!" He turned his head toward the rest of the house and called out, "[Ammee](#)! It's Sikander [bhai](#)! He's home! [Bhai-jan](#)'s home!"

Tentatively, Rabia, Abdul Latif, and Saleem stepped out of the Pajero and absorbed the peaceful seclusion. Despite the home's warm, inviting quality, its scale and unfamiliarity were intimidating.

Rabia took care to avoid any soiling of her nice clothes by picking up the hem as she stepped forward. Seeing her, Jamil exclaimed, "[Bhabhi](#)!" and embraced her. Although unfamiliar with the word, Rabia was sure of its friendly meaning and embraced him back.

In short order, everyone approached the door.

"Sikannderrrr!" hailed a voice. Rushing to greet her son, Sofie hurriedly approached Sikander, bringing him close to her bosom, absorbing his presence with her motherly love. She uttered silent prayers of gratitude and when her eyes met Rabia's, a fresh smile broke onto her face as she reached for her new daughter-in-law. Without hesitation, she laid a hand over Rabia's head, stroking gently before pulling her in closer to herself. Sofie would have to know her better for this feeling to transform into genuine, heartfelt love, but there was no reason not to expect that to happen soon.

Abdul Latif and Saleem watched the scene politely. Though of course they were both welcome, they felt the stiffness of being first-time visitors and of not belonging.

Seeing them in their unease, Sofie apologized as she released the two newlyweds while drawing her [dupattha](#) forward. She invited the men to come into the lounge to take a seat. Before they moved, Sikander began the introductions.

"[Ammee](#), this is Abdul Latif [bhai](#) and Saleem [bhai](#). They took me in, saw to my needs and, with only a *little* pressure, helped me to decide to fight for their cause, [alhamdulillah](#)!"

Sofie politely repeated her gesture for them to enter the lounge. Sikander followed them in while Sofie led Rabia. Rabia tried to embrace being in her future home and avoid feeling like a guest but quickly abandoned the attempt. It was too soon and too big a transition for her to make. As soon as she did let go, she became more at ease.

"Where's [Abba-jee](#)?" asked Sikander. A loving stare cast at his mother lasted longer than the question warranted.

"Your father was prepared to spend the day at home but at noon he got called away to deal with a customer who couldn't wait, [bettha](#). He wanted so much to be here for you but—" Sofie shrugged wistfully, "his customer was inflexible."

"A customer *is* a source of a living," Abdul Latif remarked, attempting a constructive comment.

"Indeed, Brother Abdul Latif, indeed," acknowledged Sofie with a polite smile and, she wrongly believed, with more meaning than Abdul Latif could possibly have known given the family's crisis of a couple of years earlier.

"He should be home soon. He called just before you all arrived and said he won't be away from home any longer than absolutely necessary." Sofie's mind switched gears as she realized the time. "Please pardon the impoliteness, but may I know if you are fasting today?" she asked.

Several nods came in response, clarifying the absence of any need to offer water or refreshments, while prompting her next question. "And does anyone need to pray [asr](#)?"

The men affirmed. Sikander went to the prayer room behind the lounge to see if all was in order. Indeed it was, as was the rest of the house, in obvious anticipation of his return. He indicated to the men to join him.

Meanwhile, Sofie focused on Rabia, studying her, admiring her natural beauty. She mentally rehearsed dressing and decking her in jewelry as a young girl might imagine playing with a doll.

"Your first time in Pakistan?" Sofie asked.

"Yes," responded Rabia. Her mother-in-law's presence, the strange surroundings, and her new status as [bahu](#) of the household, imposed a level of shyness on Rabia, insurmountable even by her.

"And how does it feel?" asked Sofie, hoping to elicit more than a conversation-killing syllable.

Although she bravely dealt with the obvious contrast in living circumstances between Laghar Juy and this home, Rabia was filled with new admiration for her husband. Throughout his time in Afghanistan, he never succumbed to drawing arrogant comparisons between their two worlds.

"I haven't seen very much yet, but what I *have* seen appears to me to be very pleasant. Sik—," she hesitated, not knowing if saying her husband's name was an accepted or frowned upon behavior. Mercifully, it took only a moment to recall Sofie's own reference to Javed by his given name. "Sikander has told me many wonderful things about you all, and about Pakistan." Rabia paused, supposing that was enough to say before inviting her mother-in-law to speak.

"Rabia, please relax. This is your home now. You are not our guest but our new daughter." As if the word had been a cue, Sameena entered the lounge. She had been in the shower, taking longer than was reasonable to get herself ready for the family homecoming. At fifteen, Sameena had started developing rebellious tendencies around her mother, but today the adolescent was on her best behavior as she too was filled with a sense of wellbeing. Besides, she was curious about her new sister-in-law.

"[Salaam Ammee-jan](#)—Oh, Rabia [bhabhi](#)? [Assalaamu 'alaykum](#)!" she offered, her eyes brightening upon making contact with Rabia's.

“[Wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#), Sameena,” Rabia responded, returning the smile. Given their small age difference, Sameena held the potential to be someone she might come to befriend.

“Here, Sameena.” Sofie gestured to a seat beside Rabia.

The men returned to the lounge from prayer, taking the same places as before. Sameena sprang to her feet to greet the brother she hadn’t seen or spoken to in almost two years, exclaiming “[Bhai-jan!](#)” as she rushed to hug him. Sikander barely recognized his little sister. He had missed her embarking upon her journey into womanhood. As Abdul Latif and Saleem stepped aside to make room for the reunion, Sikander pulled Sameena toward him. Being much taller than she was, his bearded chin rested over her head as he held her and allowed a tear to roll down his cheek, while softly and more than once, he uttered her name.

The greeting concluded, Sameena resumed her place next to Rabia with more warmth than before. She, too, was filled with expectancy over the possibilities that a new relationship with a female companion of similar age might offer. After some harrowing times, the family ship was finally settling upright.

“Sarwat!” Sofie called out. Sarwat, had replaced Sairah as the family maidservant. She entered the lounge and was asked by Sofie to start preparation of that day’s [iftar](#).

“Brother Abdul Latif and Saleem, we’ve made complete arrangements for you to stay with us for as long as you like but at the very least for the next few nights after your long journey,” offered Sofie.

“That’s generous of you, Sister,” replied Abdul Latif. “But we have accommodations up in Jamrud and we should be leaving soon.”

“Not at all, brother,” Sofie insisted. “You must stay with us, at least tonight. We would be honored and you can no doubt tell my husband about your experiences in the war. He’ll certainly be interested.”

“If you insist,” Abdul Latif responded with appropriate deference. “It will be we who will be honored.” He turned to Saleem to discuss what should be done about Zaffer and the car. “We have to return the car to our host in Jamrud. We—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” assured Sofie. “We can supply you with our own car and driver if you need transportation over the next day or so. Let your driver go. Please.”

Saleem was dispatched to release Zaffer, who set off back for Jamrud.

The absence of an unfamiliar vehicle in the patio area left Javed uncertain as to his son’s arrival. Sofie arose as soon as she heard the vehicle pull into the carport, and proceeded to the door to greet her husband. Hastily explaining who else her husband should expect to find in the lounge, and that Javed should be on his best behavior, she dusted off his business suit and adjusted his tie, neither of which he was accustomed to wearing.

Thus prepared, Javed eagerly entered the lounge. He was about to see his son after so long and his [bahu](#) for the first time. He barely stepped into the room before Sikander, Abdul Latif, and Saleem were on their feet.

Sikander came forward, impatient to embrace his father.

On this occasion, even uttering “[Abba](#)” was more than Sikander could handle and he simply grabbed his father around his chest to give him a long, silent hug. Javed, for his part, was only able to say his son’s name. He hugged him back and, overwhelmed with joy, repeated to himself his thanks to Allah for returning Sikander to him unharmed while conferring upon him the elevated stature of having fought and won in an honorable [jihad](#) against the Soviet empire.

It was almost a minute before Sikander let go of his father, allowing an introduction of the two other men in the room and, of course, Rabia. Abdul Latif, more relaxed now that the head of the family was home, greeted Javed warmly and offered several complimentary comments regarding Sikander’s character, intellect, and strength.

Finally, Sofie gestured to Rabia to rise and be greeted by her father-in-law, which she did and which he reciprocated with full propriety. Feeling blessed that Allah had brought him and his family to this point, a genuine delight at having a daughter-in-law radiated from Javed.

As the sun set, everyone gathered for the [iftar](#), which being on Sikander’s first day back, was auspicious. Javed was not a deeply religious man, but did see himself as God-conscious. Now, with his son back home, he felt it necessary to make a positive gesture to his Creator. In line with custom in such situations, the Hayatabad butcher’s shop was asked to slaughter two goats and distribute the meat among the local indigents as well as at a refugee camp outside Peshawar.

After [iftar](#), Javed announced he was going to the Zarghooni for that night’s [taraweeh](#), inviting the other men to join him.

In the mosque’s sonorous prayer hall, Sikander glanced at Abdul Latif and Saleem to recall this place of their first meeting almost two years earlier. They had been strangers then. Now, they had witnessed death, faced mortality, and forged a bond of marriage. Now, they were more than family.

The following day Abdul Latif and Saleem went to Jamrud market to buy provisions and sundry items to take back home. The two men came back in time for [iftar](#) and once again performed the [taraweeh](#) at the Zarghooni before spending the last night of their visit with Sikander’s family.

That evening, Javed and Jamil relaxed with Sikander, Abdul Latif, and Saleem, captivated as they listened to war experiences, particularly of Batawul, Scotland, and Arghandab. Abdul Latif led the discussion of every topic but Scotland.

The following morning, as the [suhur](#) food was laid out and the [niyyah](#) of fasting undertaken by all present, the mood was jovial enough but deep down, everyone steelled themselves for the parting to come. It all became real after [fajr](#).

Jamil and Sikander brought the baggage out into the dew-filled dawn air and set it down on the patio. Under Sikander’s bare feet, the bricks were still warm from the previous day’s heat. The aromas were as rich as the birdsong was cacophonous. Apart from a thin strip of slowly widening reddish blue on the eastern horizon, the early morning sky was dark with stars still visible, but a poor imitation of the splendor of the [Spin Ghar](#) nights. The moon, having yet to reach its first quarter, was below the horizon, delighting its audience half a world away with a beautiful new crescent.

The good humor subsided and with the vehicle loaded, Rabia looked upon the long face of her normally cheerful uncle standing next to it. He had no daughter and she had long been a surrogate, but especially so after his brother’s death. Leaving young Rabia with her new family was an unfamiliar, bittersweet experience for him. But the anguish was eased considerably by knowing he had let her go into Sikander’s respectable, well-to-do, and God-fearing family.

Javed tried to inject a little cheer. “Brother, please do come back with the rest of your family. The same for you, young Saleem.”

Saleem gave a polite nod, breaking from his otherwise glum expression. Sofie emerged onto the patio bringing a couple of last-minute gift packages and two envelopes. “Brother, please convey these to Sisters Noor and Razya. I’m longing to meet them.”

“Rest assured, Sister,” responded Abdul Latif, unable to bring himself to pronounce Sofie’s name. “They’ll be delivered. Please make [du’a](#) for us to have a safe return.” Finally he turned to Sikander.

With his eyes locked on Sikander's and lips quivering, Abdul Latif tried to say something but couldn't. He shrugged as his arms engulfed Sikander before wiping the dampness from his own eye. He turned next to Rabia, gently bringing her head to his bosom, as she too made a futile attempt to speak while fighting back a stream of tears. The stream won as she remained to see the men finally enter the car and drive off. Stepping outside the metal gate in the dawn air, the family group didn't stop waving until the car turned the corner and disappeared.

Their departure allowed Rabia and Sikander to move on in their own hearts. Rabia had already begun to adjust herself to being in the place she would call home. Sikander, meanwhile, home at last, felt safe and able to relax in a way he hadn't experienced for a very, very long time.

Home. The word had acquired new dimensions in Sikander's mind. He wanted to swim in its welcoming warmth. It was a warmth that penetrated the coldest, darkest recesses of his consciousness, which even in the short span of his life thus far had needed to accommodate memories of conflict, death, and friends lost. But now an integral part of who he had become, no matter how painful, such memories could never be excised from his psyche.



Chapter 11

RAMADHAN OF 1988 CULMINATED in a joyous [‘Eid-ul-Fitr](#), ~~which~~ **Wahid Electric** amplified by the commencement just a few days earlier of troop withdrawals by the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The Soviets were leaving Najibullah Ahmadzai in charge as the nominal president, but most people didn’t give him good odds at surviving many weeks beyond the last Soviet troop departure. They were wrong.

In Pakistan, the situation for refugees hardly improved around Peshawar. They were still amassed near the city at Nasir Bagh to the northwest and Azhakhel to the east. They needed basic facilities, which were hard to provide, and even those needed for the army of NGO and foreign aid workers engaged in relief operations were lacking. From a business point of view, Javed was busier than ever. In fact, in the almost two years his son had been fighting in Afghanistan his company had quadrupled in size and now had over a hundred employees in a handful of cities in the northern half of Pakistan.

Their electric pumps, motors, and generators were always in demand and not simply to meet refugee camp needs. Pakistan’s electricity grid was less than adequate for the demands of its exploding population and load shedding was a daily occurrence. Generators were essential items for most businesses, threatening viability if not installed. Wahid Electric Supply Company was in a strong position to capitalize on this trend.

In early June, the company moved to a new, larger wholesale warehouse and headquarters in the Industrial Estate district to the northwest of Hayatabad. With Sikander now safely home from the fighting, Javed was a transformed and optimistic entrepreneur.

Sikander and Rabia were in the process of settling in at home, and the family began adjusting to the resumed presence of its elder son and his bride. Sikander was able to reconnect with Hamid—though not to the same degree as before—and his other friends from school. Hamid had finished school, landed his much-desired PAF commission, and was about to start his second year at the Pilot Academy in Risalpur, not far from Peshawar, near Nowshera. Sofie meanwhile maintained a good relationship with Rubina.

Rabia had to work to find her place in the family, applying much of what she’d gathered from Hinna together with her own considerable instincts. Her inquisitive nature quickly helped her lose her shyness, particularly around Sofie and Sameena. It was most effective when the conversation revolved around Sofie’s life and experiences, focusing, as Hinna had advised, on Sofie’s first days and months as the wife of Javed.

Generally, the strategy worked, but like all new relationships, there were episodes when sparks flew. Usually, it was from some trivial aspect of Rabia’s habits or style such as in food preparation or cleaning up. It would have been worse if the family hadn’t had Sarwat, the maidservant, to do most of these things most of the time.

“I can’t understand your mother,” Rabia complained on one occasion, after being taken to task for failing to set the tableware properly. “She could simply tell me how to do it correctly, but she gets so...so frustrated. Blames me for failing to be born with the knowledge and then looks at me as if I’m not from Earth!”

Sikander shrugged, declaring he was powerless to replace his mother. It was a feeble and unwelcome attempt at humor. When Rabia chafed at his not taking her seriously enough, he felt compelled to remind her that though it might be technically possible, he had no intention of replacing her either.

Sikander was truly in love with his wife. He had known her for exactly two years and her personality, beauty, and intellect were a perfect match for him. Still, it would be nice, he thought, if she could dial down her [Shinwari](#) temper a notch—especially when crossing with his [Yousufzai](#) mother.

As time passed, the flare-ups grew shorter-lived and less frequent. Although rules in Afghan village society were more complex and numerous than those that governed her life now, it was a substantial leap from Laghar Juy to upper-middle-class Peshawar. These rules were different, and the learning curve was steep. But progress was rapid as she rarely let an important piece of information get past her, and even more rarely forgot anything already learned. Deep down, Sofie and Rabia enjoyed each other’s company. Sofie’s patrician background demanded respect, while Rabia’s quick wit earned the same from Sofie. Above all else, both women knew and trusted that each loved Sikander.

One impact of Rabia’s arrival was her ability to act as a bridge between Sofie and Sameena. She could reliably represent the point of view of each to the other, and even during Rabia’s short experience with them thus far, a noticeable improvement in relations between Sameena and her mother could be seen.

By July, as Sikander re-entered the rhythms of living in Peshawar, he decided to prepare for a return to school in whatever way possible in September. Seventeen-year-old Jamil had done well and brought home stellar exam results from University Public School. The same, however, could not be said of Sameena, who had lost a worrying amount of ground in her English, mathematics, and science scores. Although she performed well in fine arts, it would not be adequate to get the kind of A-Level results required for a high quality career. On Sikander’s advice, Sofie decided that Sameena’s pursuit of art interests should be suspended unless she agreed to summer tutoring. Despite protestation over the potential conflicts with Sameena’s social calendar, Sofie refused to be importuned. Sameena’s ordinarily reliable charming of Javed proved ineffective. He was too busy tending to the source of the family’s income to be available to the debate. With the matter settled, Sofie began the search for a female tutor.

About a week later, a local teacher, Maryam Reza, came to the house. After this preliminary visit to iron out administrative issues, the first full session of tutoring began in earnest. It took place in the dining room and was intended for Maryam to gauge Sameena’s proficiency. Rabia was descending the stairs when she heard Sameena reading hesitantly in English. It was a passage from Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*:

“...old when he was caught, that makes him nearly seventy—a ripe age for an elephant. He remembered pushing, with a big leather pad on his forehead, at a gun stuck in deep mud, and that was before the Afghan War of 1842, and he had not then come to his full strength.”

The exotic language emerging from Sameena’s lips caught Rabia’s attention at the point where the word “Afghan” was mentioned. Her descent arrested, she wondered why Sameena’s English reading had included the name of her people. Limited by the few words taught her by Sikander, Rabia would, for now at least, have to live with the mystery.

Sameena’s reading, with Maryam’s frequent corrections in the [Pashto](#) that Rabia readily understood, awoke in Rabia a yearning to be educated and able to speak English like her husband. She had a natural curiosity about the world, and when admonishing Sameena or Jamil for failing in their own inquisitiveness, she would often quote the Holy [Qur’an’s](#) enjoining all to explore the perceivable world and in it, see the signs of God. But now, all she could feel was frustration.

That night, she posed the question to Sikander, “Don’t you think I should learn to read and write English like you? The whole world uses it. There’s no harm, is there?”

“As a matter of fact I think it’s a great idea. I was thinking about Urdu too.”

Rabia was surprised that the subject had even occurred to Sikander. “You never mentioned it.”

“Frankly, it occurred to me when we arranged for Maryam to tutor Sameena. Since she’s here anyway, perhaps the two of you could learn together?”

“Yes, I was thinking something similar, too.” professed Rabia, becoming excited at the prospect. “And Sameena and I could help each other, though I can’t imagine how I could ever catch up with her.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Rabia. If she slackens off like she’s been doing at school, the way you go feeding on minds like a hungry tiger? It might take—a week?” Sikander laughed, ducking to avoid an oncoming pillow. Recognizing herself in his comment, Rabia couldn’t suppress a chuckle.

The necessary formality of Sofie’s permission as matriarch was unhesitatingly given. The arrangements were made; after each one-hour lesson with Sameena, Maryam’s attention was directed to Rabia in Sameena’s presence. It improved Sameena’s understanding to have her involved in teaching Rabia, and the two fed each other’s progress in Maryam’s absence.

After faltering steps with a rusty alphabet, from Sikander’s original teaching, Rabia began reading elementary children’s books from the series *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. She also prized her *Sixth Edition Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, which on occasion she read for simple recreation. It made Sikander’s life a little more miserable whenever he was called upon to explain the meanings of the words used to describe yet other words. Sometimes it revealed his own incomplete understanding of the language and when it did, Rabia never lost the opportunity to tease.

As the weeks passed, her grasp of the subject and her sharp mind made the going easy. Before long, she found she could make sense of some of the English language segments on TV. Even more interesting for her was the *Dawn* newspaper that arrived daily. When everyone else had done with it, she read it privately at her own pace, especially enjoying the lifestyle cues from its numerous articles and advertisements.



In the small back room of a house in Peshawar, an organization that had been instrumental in funneling money and recruiting non-Afghan [mujahideen](#) to fight the Soviets was embarking upon a transformation. It was called [Maktab-ul-Khidmat](#) and it had been founded back in 1980 by a former Jeddah University professor, a Palestinian called Abdullah Azzam. He was later joined by his former student protégé. His name was Osama Bin Laden, and he came from the family that owned Saudi Arabia’s giant Saudi BinLadin Group construction company. Bin Laden had become a major source of the [Maktab’s](#) funding. As the war was drawing to a close, Azzam wanted the organization to narrow its focus on Afghanistan and peacefully establish a purely Islamic state there. In strong disagreement with Azzam, a third member, Ayman al-Zawahiri advocated escalating the fight beyond Afghanistan into a global Islamic [jihad](#) against anyone opposed to the establishment of a single contiguous Islamic polity across the entire Muslim world. This included deposing corrupt rulers of Muslim countries, not least of which was his own native Egypt’s Hosni [Mubarak](#). Al-Zawahiri had spent three years imprisoned as a member initially of the Muslim Brotherhood and later, the Egyptian Islamic [Jihad](#).

With a complete Soviet withdrawal now in sight, the debate had come to a head and the arguments became more heated. Bin Laden leaned in al-Zawahiri’s direction.



Rabia was luckily able to remain in contact with her family. Abdul Latif made frequent trips to Peshawar for supplies and weapons, and when he did, he rarely failed to visit his niece. One such trip was in mid August. Abdul Latif’s sons and nephews remained in Laghar Juy for harvesting and planting and while he stayed with Javed’s family, the three [mujahideen](#) that had joined him on this trip were put up at Arif’s house.

On August 17, while he, Sikander, Javed, Sofie, and Rabia were sitting out in the back courtyard chatting about how the fight was dragging on in Afghanistan, Jamil burst outside.

“It’s Zia. Zia’s *dead*! His plane crashed!”

“What!?” Javed cried out.

“No!” exclaimed Abdul Latif as he stood up transfixed as everyone else hurried to join Jamil in the TV room and gather around the screen. Reports were being relayed of the deaths of Zia-ul-Haque, much of the Pakistani military high command, the U.S. ambassador Arnold Raphel, and U.S. brigadier general Herbert Wassom, in a PAF C130 in Bahawalpur. Not much remained of the crashed aircraft, and there was little information about how the crash occurred.

Shaking himself loose from his temporary paralysis, Abdul Latif joined the rest of them. As he hurried into the TV room, he recited under his breath the customary Quranic [ayah](#) for a Muslim’s passing. His next thoughts were to see if this would mean any immediate change of plans.

“May I call a friend?” he asked.

Javed, nodded, his eyes glued to the TV. Sikander showed Abdul Latif to the phone. It took eight attempts for Abdul Latif to get through to Arif, who was equally distraught.

“What will happen? With us?” Abdul Latif heaved. “With the fight? Do you think the Russians will use this to change their minds? Will Pakistan still support us? And what about the Americans?”

Sikander, who had initially waited outside the room, entered, naturally curious to learn what all this implied for the [mujahideen](#).

“Brother, I can’t say right now,” replied Arif. “What’s left of the high command appears to be treating it like an accident, but several things remain unknown, from what Junaid is telling me. All he can say is that they’ve lost a lot of top officers and it’ll take time to recover.”

“But Zia was our main supporter! He was the one who argued with the Americans—”

“You’ll have to wait a few days, Abdul Latif! It just happened. It’s too soon to know what’s next. Listen; call me in three or four days, when the dust settles. Meanwhile stay put. You have your niece there with you anyway and your men are safe with me here.”

Deeply worried, Abdul Latif cradled the handset. All he could do was speculate—Who did it? Who would come to power? Would they support the [mujahideen](#)? His head was exploding with unanswerable questions.

Sikander was powerless to help. He escorted Abdul Latif silently back to the TV room. By now the news wasn’t new. They switched off the TV and blankly looked at each other.

Still dazed, Abdul Latif followed the other men into the lounge.

“The plane was bobbing up and down and the pilot wasn’t in radio contact,” said Javed. “If there was a problem with the aircraft, they would surely have heard something from the pilot, some distress message, wouldn’t they?”

Javed’s implication presaged an obvious conclusion. If the pilot had not communicated with the ground, he was likely harmed in some way. That

could mean sabotage. Certainly not a missile, as the reports had all indicated the aircraft was intact when it slammed into the ground.

Whatever the truth, the Pakistani pastime of formulating and promulgating conspiracy theories went into overdrive.

Zia had his enemies. The Bhutto family lost their leader at his hands. The Soviets could hardly have been more pleased with his death. It had been at his instigation that American support for the [mujahideen](#) expanded and turned the tide against them. Pakistan's Movement for the Restoration of Democracy had been frustrated by a succession of promised, but invariably postponed election dates. The list of Zia haters included the Indians—among the handiest of candidates for Pakistani political conspiracies—and even Mossad, the Israeli secret service, which was believed to have infiltrated the [ISI](#). Whatever the real facts, they would not emerge quickly.

After several days, the political fog cleared a little. Mirza Aslam Baig was now the highest-ranking military officer. Neither wishing for limelight nor to follow the fate of his predecessor, he declared that elections would proceed as scheduled. The aging Ghulam Ishaq [Khan](#) was sworn in as president and the November elections were set to take place in a way that no candidate could have imagined just a few days earlier.

What remained for Abdul Latif to learn, however, was whether or not support for the [mujahideen](#) was to proceed unimpeded. If not, he would have to rethink his plans. He would doubtless need to return immediately to Afghanistan, but the journey would be virtually impossible without [ISI](#) support. On the heels of General Baig's pronouncements, it was time to call Arif again.

"So? What news?"

"Brother, you can relax. We're still fully committed to the [mujahideen](#). Junaid has it on highest authority within the [ISI](#) that the effort must continue. In fact, we have to consider planning a large campaign against Najibullah. It won't be enough to have the Soviets gone if he's still in power. And the [mujahideen](#) need to be assembling a government."

Greatly relieved, Abdul Latif agreed.

Arif also told him that he would be receiving weapons, supplies, and all necessary [ISI](#) assistance to enable him and his men to return to Afghanistan. Abdul Latif took his leave from Javed and Sofie, made his [salaams](#) to Sikander and Rabia, and returned to Arif's place to join the rest of his men for the long trip home.

With the election now in full swing and the country's news more intense than ever, Rabia continued watching TV and reading *Dawn* almost incessantly, while quickly gaining on Sameena in her grasp of English. As an added bonus, Rabia also rapidly improved her Urdu from natural immersion in Peshawari life.

By the end of August, things settled down in the aftermath of Zia's death. Sikander's attempts to return to University Public School proved too complicated. He opted instead to take tutoring, which worked out well, allowing him to become better acquainted with the family business while preparing for his A-Levels at home. He routinely discussed business with his father, which pleased Javed immensely. There was a new maturity and confidence that Javed could clearly see in Sikander. It contrasted with the well-meaning naïveté of the young man who had stormed out of the family's lives two years earlier.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan a new mission had taken shape. Former [DRA](#) general, Abdul Rahim Wardak, who defected and was now with [NIFA](#), planned an operation to cut the Jalalabad-to-Kabul road as a prelude to attacking Jalalabad from the Torkhum sector on its east, while cutting resupply opportunities for the [DRA](#) out of Kabul on its west. Younus Khalis's HIK forces, the [Hezb-e-Islami](#) Hekmatyar, and the Jamiat-i-Islami Afghanistan each joined in a loose coalition with [NIFA](#) in an attempt at a coordinated attack. The offensive was codenamed "[Ghashay](#)." At that scale, it required several hundred tons of supplies to be ferried by mule across from Pakistan. Being with the HIK, Abdul Latif and his sons and nephews made more frequent trips supporting Operation [Ghashay](#) throughout September and early October. This in turn meant equally frequent visits to meet the always-welcoming family in Hayatabad.

At such times, Rabia was proud to demonstrate her advancement as she read the newspaper and translated it into [Pashto](#) as best she could, invariably eliciting compliments from Ejaz, Abdul Rahman, Abdul Majeed, and Abdul Latif.

In early October, it was Saleem who accompanied Abdul Latif, arriving in the late afternoon. Saleem was genuinely happy to see his sister after several months. But when she approached him in greeting, he was distant in a way that she had neither experienced nor expected, simply passing his hand over her head in an act of fatherly blessing. He also had a significantly larger beard than before, looking more aloof than the warm and loving brother she remembered. Later that evening, dinner was served with the entire family together.

"Brother Abdul Latif," began Javed, "how's the Soviet withdrawal going? Do you see any difference in life in Laghar Juy?"

"They're proceeding, but make no mistake, brother, Najib is like a fishbone in the gullet," replied Abdul Latif with disgust. "The [DRA](#) isn't simply melting away."

"We'll continue to pray for you and your efforts. Hopefully the current buildup will accomplish its objectives," responded Javed, being appropriately vague.

After dinner, Javed, Sofie and Abdul Latif took to the lounge to chat as was common during such visits. The two men had come to enjoy each other's company. Meanwhile, Saleem, Rabia, and Sikander went into the TV room.

"Saleem, you seem quiet this evening. How is everyone at home? Is [aba'i](#) well?" began Rabia. "And what news of Ejaz and Hinna?"

"So many questions, Rabia!" Saleem observed. "We miss your questions back home. It's too quiet without you. [Aba'i](#) is fine and, yes, she misses you and looks forward to when you might be back. Hinna's expecting, as you know."

"Yes," responded Rabia, "the baby's due in—December? It must be too late for her to go back to her parents until afterward, right?"

Saleem nodded. Rabia lowered her gaze briefly before lifting her beaming face. "Brother Saleem, I can now read English language newspapers. Would you like me to show you?"

"It's uh...late, and I have to do [isha](#) and get to sleep. Perhaps in the morning, Rabia?" Saleem rose to excuse himself.

Rabia waited until he was out of earshot. "Sikander, did you notice Saleem's behavior?"

"Hm. He didn't seem to be his usual self. He's normally quiet but it seems he's become more religiously stern. When Ejaz was here last time, he mentioned that Younus Khalis had visited Laghar Juy to offer his encouragement to the [mujahideen](#). Khalis persuaded some of the young men to travel with him for a while, supposedly to give them more guidance in the way of [Islam](#). Saleem and your cousins were among them, but Ejaz did remark how Saleem seems to be more deeply into this stuff than the others."

"Well," replied Rabia, "he seems quiet, that's all. If he's following [Islam](#) more properly, there's nothing wrong with that. Maybe we can learn something from him too."

“Mmm...maybe.”

As they were alone in the room, Rabia moved up behind the seated Sikander and put her arms around his neck as she lowered her head next to his.

“Have you thought about children, Sikander?” she asked, wearing a broad smile.

“Mmm? Yes—” he replied, laying a hand on her forearm, “but we have a lot of time. I’ve just turned twenty and you’re still in your teens, so what’s the hurry?”

“Oh, I’m not saying right now, Sikander. I was just...asking.” Unable to let go of the smile, she added with signature sarcasm, “Come on, let’s go back to the lounge and—join the adults?”

Sikander smirked. They moved to the lounge.

“Ah, Sikander, Abdul Latif and I agree that it would be helpful if I send over one or two diesel pumps and a turbo-generator. That way, they’ll be able to create a reservoir and generate electricity for the village,” pronounced Javed, clearly pleased with himself and his small contribution to the [mujahideen](#) effort.

“Will you be able to take such things with you on this trip, brother?” asked Sikander. “It seems like a lot for something unplanned.”

“True enough, but it could be done the next time we come, if the equipment can be broken down into components so the mules can carry them.”

“That’s excellent, then,” answered Sikander, impressed with his father’s generosity. Before long the conversation petered out and everyone finally went to bed.

The following morning, Rabia wanted to show Saleem how much progress she’d made in her English lessons by reading from *Dawn*. Saleem offered a polite compliment to her for improving herself but reminded her to guard her modesty.

“Well,” she pouted, mortified. “It’s not like I’m parading the streets.” She was obviously disappointed at Saleem’s less than delighted reaction to her efforts. Sensing where the conversation might be headed, Sikander tried to change its course. “Rabia, why don’t you tell Saleem what you make of life in Peshawar?”

Sikander’s condescending attempt at intervention annoyed Rabia. Brushing it off, she defiantly resumed her reading, this time reporting that Benazir Bhutto was ahead of the opposition in the running for the November election.

Women in politics! That’ll get Saleem going! Sikander risked another deflection. He’d patch it up with Rabia later.

“So how’s Usman doing, Saleem?”

“Very well, virtually another son to Uncle Abdul Latif, and he still goes on missions. He and I make a good Stinger team. He seems to have fit right into your old shoes, Sikander, though rest assured, we do miss you. But thankfully, we’ve been a lot less busy with Stingers lately.”

Rabia looked on with a cynical smirk.

Abdul Latif and Saleem left that morning to ferry their cargo of weapons and supplies across to Afghanistan.

After the first week of November, word came that Operation [Ghashay](#) had been an outstanding success. General Wardak destroyed two bridges over a four-kilometer stretch of the Jalalabad-to-Kabul road, with a large contingent of vehicles and [DRA](#) soldiers stuck between them. The [mujahideen](#) attacked the troops in force and overwhelmed them, leaving more than five hundred dead and more than two hundred captured, including almost a dozen officers. The [DRA](#) lost over forty tanks and [APCs](#), while several other light and heavy weapons were captured along with the prisoners.

In the middle of the month, Benazir Bhutto won the election and was duly sworn in as prime minister. Life continued largely unchanged until February the following year, when the last of the Soviet forces officially departed. Najibullah remained head of the central government and [mujahideen](#) forces continued to hammer away at the [DRA](#), who could no longer rely on Soviet help. [Mujahideen](#) progress was much slower than anyone anticipated, however. The [DRA](#) seemed to be more effective as a fighting force, perhaps from the knowledge that there was no longer a Russian crutch. They were on their own now.

Javed’s business met with continuing success, and Sikander’s involvement in Wahid Electric’s operations deepened. Since returning to Pakistan, along with catching up on missed schooling, learning more about the business had been important to him and Javed was happy to indulge his son’s wishes. Sikander had proven leadership potential, and what better than to lead the family’s company? Sikander’s personable nature allowed him to build relationships with the people who worked for his father. One such person was Munir Anwar.

Munir was a forty-two-year-old Punjabi who had migrated up to Peshawar in the mid 1970s. Having won Javed’s confidence, he was placed in charge of buying, proving himself to be a dedicated and hard-working person. This left Javed to focus on sales to major accounts and another employee, Rehan, to manage the counter staff for walk-in business and small accounts.

From its warehouses the company distributed motors, pumps, switches, and generators, along with other small electrical items. Wahid Electric obtained locally produced items directly from manufacturers, and imported foreign-made products from larger scale distributors in Singapore or Dubai. Goods were picked up from the port of clearance for overseas items and trucked to the growing number of outlets owned by the company. Contractors, government agencies, and the military were the usual buyers and their purchases generally consisted of no more than one or two items of any given type.

Javed typically doubled his cost to arrive at a price, giving him fifty percent gross profit, which covered his overhead and returned a decent net profit if volumes could be maintained. With most of his suppliers he had payment terms, and the majority of his business was with cash paying contractors, giving him considerable working capital liquidity.

Sikander was sharp-witted enough to understand the numbers and the overall business concept but felt weaker in his knowledge of the company’s products. Learning more about them meant spending time with Munir.

Munir was a portly man who always wore a [qamees](#) and [shalwar](#) to work. He ate well and it was easier on his waist to be able to loosen or tighten his [ezarband](#) as needed. His desk and office were littered with catalogues and he was constantly on the phone negotiating with suppliers over price, hunting down stray shipments, arguing with customs officials, barking at trucking companies, or sorting out space for incoming deliveries. He could do all these things in English, Punjabi, [Pashto](#), and Urdu. Sitting across the desk from Munir and having a conversation with him was like trying to cross a busy highway. Each comment or question had to be delivered or received in between all the other things competing for his attention.

The answers to Sikander’s questions came back in manageable packets of meaning, interrupted by a phone ringing, the conversation on the phone itself, the resumption of the answer, back to the phone, and so on, until eventually it was all reassembled as best it could be, back in Sikander’s head. Munir tolerated such questions as Sikander was, after all, the owner’s son and no doubt set to rule the company one day.

Along with product knowledge, Sikander also formed a better grasp of the purchasing side of the business and felt ready to engage his father more deeply about it. Some of his questions were still naïve but others had merit. Javed had become a more mellow personality since Sikander first left home

and was happy to spend the time answering his son, but more than that, Javed enjoyed asking Sikander for his opinion on just about anything.



Following the Soviet Union's withdrawal, most of the non-Afghan [mujahideen](#) also departed. Most notably, Osama Bin Laden returned to his native Saudi Arabia, though he was frequently in and out of Pakistan.

In the back rooms of the small house in Peshawar where the [Maktab-ul-Khidmat](#) had routinely convened, things had not gone well for Abdullah Azzam. There was increasing acrimony between himself and al-Zawahiri over the matter of the future direction of the [Maktab's](#) resources. Al-Zawahiri argued that with the coming end of the Cold War and America emerging victorious, the new threat to the realization of his vision for a global Islamic state was America itself, hitherto the staunchest ally of the [mujahideen](#). He further argued that if a disorganized band of [mujahideen](#) could prevail over a vastly superior foe, it could only have been by the will of Allah, and the same zeal and conviction about ultimate victory was needed in opposing America as it had been with the Soviet Union. Al-Zawahiri's fiery rhetoric appealed to Bin Laden, despite the latter's long standing friendship with Azzam.

On November 24, 1989, while on their way to an evening prayer at the local [masjid](#), Abdullah Azzam and his three sons were killed by anti-personnel mines. Whoever was responsible, al-Zawahiri's ascendancy with Bin Laden was assured. Having lost its co-founder, [Maktab-ul-Khidmat](#) was duly absorbed into a new organization whose aim as al-Zawahiri had articulated, was to establish a single Islamic state across the Muslim world through armed struggle. It was called the Base—in Arabic, “al-Qaeda.”

Al-Zawahiri's position seemed vindicated when the United States virtually abandoned Afghanistan as a place no longer worthy of attention or expenditure once the Russians left. The Soviet Union was collapsing; Cold War victory had been achieved, and certainly to several hard-nosed congressmen, a post-war involvement offered no re-election benefit.

In August 1990, however, a seismic event shook the political globe, with aftershocks that would reverberate for well over a decade. From under the sleeping noses of the world's most sophisticated intelligence communities, the former U.S. ally against the ayatollahs of Iran, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, chose to lay claim to Kuwait by military force. His troops barreled into the neighboring and largely defenseless country to the great alarm not only of the United States but also of Saudi Arabia, whose oilfields were now within Saddam's reach.

Bin Laden immediately launched an appeal to the Saudi royals to allow his recently successful [mujahideen](#) to defend Saudi Arabia. Whether through pressure or otherwise, Fahd, the Saudi king, opted for American assistance and dismissed Bin Laden's appeals. Whatever negative feelings Bin Laden might have had until then toward America for its abandonment of Afghanistan, were now transformed to full-fledged enmity.

To him, the very idea of the presence of unbeliever soldiers on what he considered Muslim holy land was anathema, and with that presence, a pan-Islamic world state seemed more remote than ever. Bin Laden's own sensibilities as to the sacredness of Arabian lands might well have been fueled by the historic role played by the family business in maintaining, refurbishing, and expanding the holy places within the cities of Makkah and Medinah. Founded by his father, the company had contracts for these two cities that together were valued at scores of billions of dollars. It was the largest source of the family's immense wealth, and with it came a deep sense of responsibility for his family's role as caretakers of the epicenter of [Islam](#). Indeed, in the case of the Ka'aba in Mecca, the deeply cherished time-honored right to safeguard it and its precincts—fought over since pre-Islamic times—had been in the hands of Saudi BinLadin. Whatever the cause, Bin Laden was enraged.

The Gulf War was quickly prosecuted with Saddam pushed back into Iraq, his gilded cage. But success against Saddam was of minor consequence to Bin Laden. The presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil made him implacable. He swore to end that presence.

Following the war, in 1992, Bin Laden's animosity toward the Americans and the house of Saud was so strong and openly vocal that he was forced to leave Saudi Arabia. At the invitation of Omar al-Bashir's government in the Sudan, he moved al-Qaeda to that country and began in earnest to set up operations for attacks on U.S. interests until such time as the Americans “pulled out of Muslim holy lands.”

That year, Afghanistan saw the start of its next period of turmoil. With warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum switching sides to the [mujahideen](#), Najibullah's government finally fell. Najibullah tried to leave Afghanistan, but upon being blocked he returned, along with his brother, to Kabul, and took refuge in the UN compound.

Progressively, Afghanistan slid into civil war, as no single power base was strong enough, or well coordinated enough, to form a solid unifying government.



Abdul Latif now lived the more normal life of a local village elder. He successfully organized the construction of a reservoir upstream of Laghar Juy and set up one of the generators that had been provided by Javed. Wires precariously run over makeshift pylons delivered the electricity generated, enabling many village homes to have electric lighting for the first time. It was finally possible to read comfortably after sunset.

The civil war tightened its grip on Afghanistan, and with the exception of the far north and the Panjshir Valley—controlled and unified by Ahmed Shah Massoud—the rest of the country had come under the rule of lawless warlords. Resentment at the way in which drugs and the weapons they funded had become the new instruments of warlord power, simmered everywhere. Drugs found their best value in the developed countries of the West, so not surprisingly, many of these countries sought ways in which to stem the trade.

Among other reactions within Afghanistan, a significant backlash of religiosity began to brew in response to the warlordism, and its first small ripples could be felt in Laghar Juy, even creeping into the family. Abdul Majeed and Saleem had become increasingly radical. Ejaz, Hinna, and Abdul Rahman, who was now married to Sabiha, the niece of Azam of Takhto, were much more mainstream in their outlook—though still by any measure, conservative. Rifts between the family members were apparent but had not yet led to any serious difficulties. An air of cordial tension prevailed.

Based on the ability to buy products effectively and to supply them reliably, especially in trading with the Pakistan government, Javed managed to continue the steady path of growth of the Wahid Electric Supply Company. It entered the 1990s as a fast-growing, politically well-connected, and financially strong company with offices in Karachi, Lahore, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, and Quetta, along with its headquarters in Peshawar.

By 1992, Sikander was a thriving, reasonably educated young executive who, in preparation for taking the helm someday, was becoming more confident in his developing management skills. Rabia had meanwhile become proficient in English and Urdu and liked to chat with her husband in English, very occasionally catching him out with errors. She had become a young Peshawar society woman, though neither she nor Sikander diluted their practice of [Islam](#).

Jamil was enrolled in the Lahore University of Management Sciences and was working toward an MBA, hoping to apply it to the family business. Sameena had blossomed into a beautiful nineteen-year-old and, having successfully completed her A-Levels, was admitted to an undergraduate program at the London School of Economics to study International Relations and History. All those hours of catching up under Maryam Reza had paid off. She was now also engaged to Wasim, the son of a senior army officer living in Islamabad, with the wedding set for September 1993, following completion of her bachelor's degree.

Sikander was nominally the head of human resources and labor relations for Wahid Electric. From this position, he and his father felt he would draw useful insight into how the company functioned without risking too much immediate damage from any mistake he might make. In any event, he would not be hiring or firing anyone in management without recourse to his father, so the risks were reasonably well managed. His office was on the mezzanine level of the building and overlooked the warehouse.

On a routine October morning, Sikander was returning to his office from the material handling area at the back of the warehouse after dealing with a minor labor issue. Having just climbed to the mezzanine level, he was about to pass by one of the guest offices for people visiting from other company locations around the country. No one was visiting that day—Sikander would have known about it—yet he could hear someone using the phone in the office, as its door was very slightly ajar. The voice was Munir's, and although Sikander had heard it many times before, the tone was unusually subdued on this occasion. Munir seemed to be struggling to sway the person on the other end of the line, but with none of his familiar self-assured and commanding tones. Sikander's curiosity was aroused.

"Yes, yes, I'll get it for you, sir. You don't have to worry, but please... be patient. It won't be much longer and you'll have what you want."

The odd nature of the location from which Munir was making or taking the call and the plaintive tone in his voice compelled Sikander to continue listening. Instinctively he held his breath and stood in a relaxed posture overlooking the warehouse floor but close to the part of the guest office that was a solid wall. This would attract the least attention from any passing employee who would simply assume he was looking at floor activity below.

Munir continued to speak: "...a little more patience and it'll be done." His nervous words traveled through the gap in the door. While Sikander listened, the door abruptly closed. Munir clearly wanted privacy and must only now have noticed that it had been slightly ajar. Fortunately, Munir didn't think to check outside before pushing it closed.

The conversation became too faint to make out. After pausing long enough to make it seem he hadn't been near the door, Sikander turned to continue along the mezzanine gangway to his own office.

He took his seat and stroked his beard, contemplating what, if anything, all this might mean. Munir was a solid hand in the business and not one to be challenged on an empty basis. If it turned out to be an innocent matter, he might even quit, out of simple indignation at an accusation. This was, after all, Pakistan. Barely provoked indignation was in plentiful supply. Trustworthy employees were not.

Sikander came up with a plan. He wouldn't confront Munir on this matter until he had something concrete. He would also keep it from his father, who might get anxious at the possibility of losing Munir and maybe do something unpredictable.

Over the next several weeks, Sikander systematically examined different kinds of transactions that in some way or other involved Munir. He began with purchases, checking the product quantities against purchase orders. Moving on to sources of supply and verifying the legitimacy of sources, he could find nothing untoward. Making sure not to arouse Munir's suspicions, he started watching the man more carefully. Other than the occasional use of the spare office for phone calls, he couldn't put a finger on anything in particular. By late November, having found nothing, Sikander reluctantly decided on one last step. He placed a call to Arif, who happened to be in Peshawar.

"Arif [bhaji](#), [Assalaamu 'alaykum](#), it's Sikander from Hayatabad. How are you, old friend?"

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam! Alhamdulillah](#), I'm fine and it's nice to hear from you. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Arif [bhaji](#), I have a favor to ask. I don't know how to reach Junaid, but if it's at all possible, I need to get some information that could help me solve a problem. Can you get him to contact me?"

"Of course!" replied Arif. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, nothing serious. I just need to check something out."

The main business done with, they exchanged a few more pleasantries before concluding the call.

A day later, Junaid called. "[Assalaamu 'alaykum](#), Sikander. How are you, [mujahid](#)? It's been a while since we last spoke!"

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#), Junaid [bhaji](#). It certainly has, my friend, and I do apologize that it has to be a request for a favor after all that time—"

"Oh, come now, Sikander, what can I do for you?"

Sikander elaborated for Junaid, hoping his friend might use his access to do some checking on Munir Anwar and his background.

"Hm. Should be straightforward enough, [inshaAllah](#)."

"[JazaakAllah](#), Junaid! You know we should get together sometime."

Two days later, Junaid called, and after the customary greetings, he began with a question.

"Sikander, what do you pay Munir?"

"About twenty thousand a month. Why?"

"Well, your man Munir is either stealing from you, getting another income from someone else, or is independently wealthy. Or, of course, all three!"

Junaid joked. "He's routinely banking between fifty and a hundred and twenty thousand rupees a month and paying out of that account in similarly large sums."

"He's what?" Sikander was stunned. "Anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," replied Junaid, smugly. "Munir appears to be a director of several companies and all of them are your suppliers. My guess is that he's directing your purchases through his own front companies to supply Wahid Electric. You're probably paying just a little too much for each product and he's likely pocketing the difference at virtually no risk, since he isn't buying anything that your company isn't already committed to buying. Your volumes give you big enough discounts not to notice his skimming and his slightly inflated prices still leave you competitive. If you go direct to his sources—which used to be Wahid's, I imagine—he won't be able to skim anything."

"Junaid [bhaji](#), can you name his companies?"

Junaid supplied the names as Sikander noted them down. It would now be a matter of going through the purchase transactions to confirm that those

names appeared as suppliers to Wahid Electric.

At the office the following day, Sikander initiated his detective work. Sure enough, Munir's companies showed up among Wahid Electric's vendors. Over a couple more days, he went through actual purchase transactions and saw the products being purchased. Scouring the historical information, he found other genuine suppliers not on Junaid's list and saw in many cases the same products at lower prices than those paid to Munir's front companies. The case was made.

Sikander decided to take the proof to his father the following day. A sense of pride came over him as he imagined Javed being impressed at his unearthing Munir's fraud, while further adding to the trust Javed would place upon him in future.

It was December 3. That evening, Sikander and Rabia had been invited to Hamid's home. Hamid was married to Afreen, the daughter of an electronics retail business owner, and the four of them were friends. Hamid was also now a flight lieutenant and by all accounts it seemed he would soon become a squadron leader. Throughout the evening, though polite and engaging, Sikander was not his usual self. The matter of Munir gnawed at him and he wondered how he would broach the subject with his father. Still brooding, Sikander drove home with Rabia.

"Something wrong?" asked Rabia.

"Hmm? Oh...no, not really. Why?"

"You seemed distracted this evening, even now," Rabia remarked. Sikander sighed, confessed himself to be preoccupied with a work issue, and apologized for spoiling Rabia's evening. The couple returned home well after midnight and too late to discuss anything with Javed.

After a fitful night, Sikander overslept, leaving his father to head off to work without him. It also blew Sikander's chance to introduce the topic of Munir at breakfast. Rushing to get ready and quickly downing a hurriedly prepared breakfast, Sikander arrived at the office twenty minutes behind his father. He parked the car in the front lot and in nervous anticipation of the task ahead, strode through the glass entrance doors.

He was arrested by the scene confronting him. People were milling around the office reception area. Puzzled, he stepped up to them and as he made his way through them, his heart began racing. Too many of the onlookers were mumbling for him to discern anything coherent. His anxiety received another jolt as he heard the unmistakable wail of a siren growing louder as it approached the premises. Frenzied, Sikander quickened his pace, pushing people aside to allow him to pass.

He stopped abruptly.

Lying on the floor was Javed, pale and motionless. His collar button had been opened and his necktie loosened. A glass of water was on the floor next to his head. Rehan was kneeling by his side. All Sikander could do was to join him and hold up his father's head. Even as Javed failed to stir, Sikander clung to the hope of an outcome rapidly retreating from his rational mind.

"Javed [sahib](#) greeted me coming out of his office. He was about to go into the warehouse when he...he stopped suddenly. Staggered against the wall! He just...just slid down the wall all the way to the floor! I held him in my arms until his eyes—" Rehan was unable to continue.

As soon as they arrived the medics broke through the gathered onlookers. Sikander's hopes rose, but as they asked him to move aside to let them work on Javed, their faces grimly echoed the absence of life in Javed's eyes. They tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and pumping his chest to restart his heart, but to no avail. After listening closely to his chest, the lead medic stood up and heaved a sigh. With a hand on Sikander's shoulder he said, "It's over. I'm sorry."

Javed had left his body.

"No. NO. [Abbaaaa](#)!" cried Sikander. He dropped back to the floor and held his father's lifeless torso in his strong but useless arms. "[Abbaaahaa](#)," came the soft, anguished cry again as he gazed upon Javed. The moment paved the way for a rushing torrent of thoughts; thoughts of all the times that were, and those that might have been. Sikander recalled the pain he had caused by leaving home and the guilt that Javed would have taken upon himself, as if the intervening healing had never taken place. He pictured Javed's hopes for the future; hopes that Javed's soul had now casually abandoned. He pictured the way this day might have finished and how it would finish now. But most of all, he stumbled into a fascinating and terrible insight. The doors to his father's experiences and memories that had thus far been wide open for all of Sikander's life had now closed, in a single moment and without warning. Javed's memories, his experiences, all of them were gone; vanished into oblivion and beyond the reach of all existence.

While his father was placed on a gurney, Sikander sat on the polished foyer floor with his head between his knees, his paralyzed mind barely able to register what was happening. The medics waited for him. Finally standing up, his eyes streaming tears, he watched what used to be his father being prepared for removal. A thinking person that same morning with a past, a present, and aspirations for a future, had become an object, unable to process the slightest grain of thought, much less comprehend its own condition. "He" had become "it." His father's dead body.

The medics covered the body and removed it into the ambulance before driving off to the Khyber Teaching Hospital on the GT Road.

It took Sikander another minute before he could reconnect with the scene. He tried in vain to imagine something, anything that might be employed to rewind the last hour. Surely just an hour might be possible? From outside himself he could see himself reaching out to that ambulance and it being pulled back toward him in time. He could see it happening. Why couldn't it be so?

Reluctantly, Sikander's quivering lips uttered the Quranic [ayah](#) appropriate to the occasion: "[Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'un](#)." Except perhaps in dreams and sometimes nightmares in the coming days, there would be no rewinding. Everyone was sent home. A notice was placed on the doors indicating the business's temporary closure and providing Rehan's home number for emergencies.

"Javed had a short but a good life, Sofie. Allah's will is surely supreme. Patience, my poor dear. Have patience," counseled Rubina.

Sofie was in a disheveled condition. She sat listening to her friend but unable to respond, stared blankly into space. It was in sharp contrast to the bemoaning lament of earlier that day when Sikander had returned home with the tragic news.

"Javed was surely lucky not to have been a long-term invalid or otherwise a burden on the family," continued Rubina. "May Allah grant him [jannah](#) and you all the patience to continue without him."

As both their universities were on break for the holidays, Sameena and Jamil were at home. They were young to lose a parent and had a hard time handling it, alternating between uncontrollable sobbing and periods of somber interaction with the numerous extended family members and neighborhood mourners who had gathered at the family home. Many of the visitors brought food, as was the custom upon a death, so that the immediate family was spared the task of food preparation.

The family members had earlier been to the hospital to view Javed's body, which was wrapped up with the exception of his serene face. For all the world he looked as if he might wake up at any moment. To Rabia, Javed had been in every respect the ideal of a father-in-law, everything she might have wished for, and she too was distraught. But she was also a source of strength and comfort to Sikander and the rest of his family at this dark time. Her short life had already shown her enough death to stiffen her resistance to it, though never draining it of feeling and meaning.

Following the custom of Islamic burials, the funeral was speedily arranged. The family had long held burial land at the Charkhana Cemetery in Peshawar's Gulberg district. A day and a half after his passing, Javed's body was laid to rest next to his parents, Shah Nawaz and Nazeera.

Sikander was now the head of the family. He had to come to terms with all that this implied. In front of him lay the completion of Jamil and Sameena's educations and organizing both their marriages, naturally with Sofie's involvement, but financially at least and in some other important social respects, Sikander had succeeded Javed. Rabia's station in the family was thereby elevated, though she was far too thoughtful to make a point of it. Javed's death also provided an opportunity for Rabia and Sikander to see her family again, as several days after the funeral, a delegation of Abdul Latif, Razya, Noor, Abdul Rahman, Ejaz, and Hinna, accompanied by Adam and Azhar, their two sons, came to pay their respects.

As the mourning drew to a close, and coincidentally the new year began, life had to get back into a semblance of normality. The day came for Sikander to return to work. He had been thinking about this day ever since his father died, recalling how it was supposed to have revolved around confronting Munir about his deceits but ended up in the terrible way that it had. It was now time to finish what he had set out to do then, but this time no one needed convincing. He was the [maalik](#) of the company and could decide whatever he wanted.

Sikander walked into the building a little later than his father would have done. He wanted to be certain the employees would be there when he arrived. Instinctively he had a different demeanor as he hesitatingly reached for the doorknob to his father's office. Javed's full name was still painted on the door's glass with the word "Chairman" written underneath. Opening the door, he looked across to the far end of the office. Slowly he approached his father's chair, caressed it, and sat in it with reverence. The faint but unmistakable fragrance of Javed's aftershave filled the air in its immediate vicinity. Sikander sighed. His eyes moistened as they had done many times in the last week. He sighed once more, but this time with steely determination. He would show Javed's spirit all that he, Sikander, could accomplish with his father's legacy.

He asked his assistant to summon Munir.

Munir exhibited an appropriate level of remorse for Javed's death as he had dutifully done all along in its aftermath. He remarked on how Sikander reminded him of Javed. Sikander had no interest in such sentiments now. It was different when Munir was at the house offering condolences, but this was business and Munir was a problem.

For his part, Munir felt lucky that the man he had been defrauding for several years was gone and in his place was an inexperienced twenty-something. It would be plain sailing now. His debts would finally be taken care of and he could even look forward to pocketing some money on the side.

"Munir [bhai](#)," began Sikander, using the Urdu for brother as a customary mark of respect for one who was older. "I've been going over our purchases over several months and it seems for no obvious reason, we've been switching suppliers from older, more traditional sources."

Munir wasn't sure what to make of such a comment. "Suppliers?"

"Suppliers," Sikander reiterated, nodding. "I've noted that we used to use Pak Industrial Motors and then about—eight?—months ago..." Sikander studied the ledger intently as he flipped through its pages, "yes, eight months ago, we appear to have selected Punjab Electrical Imports for everything below ten horsepower? Why did we do that, Munir...[bhai](#)?"

"We...uh, we...we were given better terms, I think, [Khan sahib](#)."

"Really?" replied Sikander. "Well, that's interesting. Because when I contacted Pak Industrial, they described to me their prices for this power range and even now they appear to be lower than what we began paying eight months ago to Punjab Electrical Imports. The difference isn't very much but consistently it's there. Same product, same brand; everything's the same—except the price."

"Oh? I, uh... Really? I'll have to check that out," responded Munir. His dark complexion assumed the color of a beetroot as he awkwardly adjusted his posture.

"Yes, well, Munir [bhai](#), I must say I wonder who would be running a company like that with consistently uncompetitive pricing. I'd like to know what they were thinking to be charging us a premium when virtually every month since we've been doing business with them we've been growing our volume. Don't you wonder too?"

Munir nodded affirmatively without saying a word.

"Why don't you look into it, Munir [bhai](#)? And come back to me with a full report. Today." Sikander's eyes drilled into Munir.

"I... I'll see to it right away!" Munir got up to leave with a deferential nod, feeling in that moment that he might himself be literally following in Javed's footsteps sooner than he'd ever imagined.

"Thank you, Munir [bhai](#)."

Sikander was pleased with his first step. He was sure that Munir would resign by the end of the week. An hour after leaving Sikander's office Munir left a sealed envelope at the reception desk, addressed to his new boss. He walked out of the building, never to return.

Sikander thought about his situation. He would have to project the leadership qualities his new job required. It made him reflect upon the old days, when he was learning so much from his mentor, Abdul Latif, and his boys crossing the mountains or fighting the Russians. Somewhere in those experiences were surely lessons he might draw upon—lessons he would need as the young leader of a two-hundred-person organization spanning seven cities across Pakistan. Sikander never opened Munir's letter.

To the great delight of Sofie, in November 1993, Sikander and Rabia became the proud parents of a healthy baby boy, Ayub. It was almost a full year after Javed's passing, and whether it was real or simply the emotion following Javed's death, Sofie insisted that there was something of Javed in Ayub's eyes and lips. Sikander and Rabia couldn't see the resemblance, but if it brought solace, where was the harm in that?



Chapter 12

Students

BY 1994, PAKISTAN RETURNED Benazir Bhutto to office, continuing the country's flirtation with ping-pong democracy. In neighboring Afghanistan, however, the situation was different. The country—if this part of the world might ever warrant such a label—had all but fallen apart. Warlordism was now firmly entrenched everywhere except in the Panjshir Valley and the far north.

From Singesar, a village near Qandahar, a former member of Younus Khalis's HIK by the name of Omar was reportedly prevailed upon to come to the aid of two teenage girls who had been kidnapped and raped by one of the local warlords. Omar raised a small force of about thirty students from the local [madrassahs](#) and, armed with a total of sixteen rifles, set out to arrest the warlord. They captured the man, shot him, and hung him off a battle tank barrel for all to see.

Word of this incident reached Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto saw in these students a force quite different from the warlords. Guided by religious principle instead of the pursuit of wealth, they seemed interested in bringing order to the country. On what some might describe as “advice” from the [ISI](#), supported in turn by the CIA, she sanctioned financial assistance for the movement. It would help with securing some of the more important truck routes through the south of the country.

Encouraged by the Pakistanis, Saudis, and Americans, and empowered by their funds and their swelling numbers, this group of students began calling themselves “the students”—in [Pashto](#), “[Taliban](#).” Their leader came to be known as Mullah Omar.

The [Taliban](#) practiced an austere, self-styled form of [Islam](#) that could best be described as a blend of the [Deobandi](#) School of India and the ancient [Pashtunwali](#) tribal code, dating from before [Islam's](#) arrival in the region. Unlike the graduates of Deoband, however, most [Taliban](#) mullahs lacked the all-important “[ijazah](#)” authorizing them to transmit Islamic theology and practice.

A puritanical regime took hold, curtailing many freedoms, especially of females above the age of eight. They demanded that women wear [burkhas](#) in public. They abolished schools for older girls and women. They argued that it was impossible to create an environment conducive to female education without significant modifications to municipal infrastructure to assure separation of the sexes during travel to and from school. Modernity was shunned and education in the modern sciences and technology was widely considered a gateway to the sinful ways of the West.

With their influence reaching into most villages, the [Taliban](#) attracted numerous former [mujahideen](#). Several of Younus Khalis's people joined them, including Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Abdul Majeed and Saleem were exposed to more of their teaching than the others in the family and became more committed to the [Taliban](#) cause. Many of their fellow villagers, including Abdul Latif and the rest of his clan, welcomed the [Taliban's](#) ability to restore a semblance of peace and order, putting local warlords in check. The welcome was soon replaced, however, by fear of the [Taliban's](#) authoritarian harshness.

For the family, things came to a head in September 1995. Ejaz and Hinna had returned to Noor's place with their boys, Adam and Azhar, after visiting Hinna's parents. Hinna wore what most Muslims in the world would have considered a conservative style of dress, but because her face was partially visible, it did not comply with [Taliban](#) rules. Saleem had returned from Pakistan after a month in a [madrassah](#) near Peshawar and had become vocal about such matters. He was at home with Noor when the family walked in.

Ejaz offered his [salaams](#) in the usual fashion. Noor responded warmly but Saleem remained quiet, staring at the floor.

“Saleem?” probed his older brother. “I just greeted you. We've been away for eleven days, is a simple [salaam](#) too much to expect?” Ejaz pressed, more puzzled than hostile. After a moment's hesitation, Saleem opened up.

“Brother, I've been troubled lately...especially so now. I've had my eyes opened to the things we don't observe correctly in following [Islam](#) and...and that makes us either...” Saleem shook his head slowly as if unable to deny an inescapable truth. “It makes us [apostates](#) worthy of being put to death.” He was visibly upset with his own conviction about what he had just uttered.

“Death!?” exclaimed Ejaz with a puzzled frown. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Hm! No, not my mind. But I've been...we...we've all been on a path of losing our *souls* and I ask you, I beg you, brother, before it's too late. Adopt the true ways of our beautiful religion. Only that way can we...can our calamity as a people ever be rectified.”

Ejaz tried reasoning with his brother. “Saleem, we're not rejecting belief. Yes, we may be doing some things in ignorant ways and yes, we could learn more, but this...this Taliban practice...it's not [Islam](#). They may be well-intentioned...but they're misguided ideas put forward by so-called mullahs who never completed their own educations. Are you simply finding fault with the way we dress or walk or talk? That's what you believe protects or harms a soul before Allah?”

“Our women have been commanded to guard their modesty,” insisted Saleem. “I look at Hinna and she seems ignorant of this. The day will surely come when she'll be punished for it; for walking in the streets of the village shamelessly alone—”

“Saleem!” interjected Ejaz, angrily raising his hand. “You're talking about my wife!” He paused to let himself cool down before continuing more calmly. “We do follow [Islam](#). It's *our* faith, *our* belief. You know that. Hiding the face wasn't required in [Islam](#) except for the wives of the Prophet, may Allah's blessing and peace be upon him. The [Qur'an](#) is quite clear. Let me show you.” He stood up to reach for the family's [Pashto](#)-Arabic version off a narrow alcove high in the wall where reverence demanded it be kept, free of risk of desecration by falling or careless handling. He opened it to [Surah](#) 24, [Ayah](#) 31, and read out in [Pashto](#):

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the immodesty of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.”

Out of respect, Saleem remained silent during the reading. “Yes. Of course, I'm familiar with this verse, but if you could hear Mullah Omar, as I did in Peshawar, he'd tell you what lies behind this and the information in the authentic [hadith](#) of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Then you'd understand how you misread these words.”

“How? How did I misread them, Saleem?”

“Well, the many [hadiths](#) of the blessed Messenger of God, may peace be upon him, tell us how to interpret the [Qur'an](#). They make it plain that a woman must cover herself completely and not expose her hands and face.”

“But as you know, Saleem, direct reference from the [Qur'an](#) is always acknowledged to supersede [hadiths](#). It's only where there's ambiguity that we

use [hadiths](#). I quoted directly. Nothing in this verse refers to covering the face.”

As with all such debates, it ended inconclusively, but Saleem was clearly the more tormented of the two about the evil effects of living outside the complete guidance, in his view, of the [Qur'an](#) and [Sunnah](#). What helped him to such a conclusion was the turmoil in his country at the time, which no one could deny, and his own certainty that a national departure from the “straight and narrow path” was most assuredly the cause.

Unfortunately for Ejaz and Abdul Rahman, who himself experienced similar sentiments from Abdul Majeed, the [Taliban](#) were winning this and other debates. They had both force and international, financial backing. By 1996, armed [Taliban](#) presence was the norm in places like Laghar Juy and from that point forward, things would never be the same.

Abdul Latif, was designated village chief, but in the face of [Taliban](#) rule, the role had little meaning. Concerned though he was over such disempowerment, he was far more troubled by the seemingly unbridgeable rifts in his once unified and cheerful family.

Abdul Rahman and his wife, Sabiha, and their family kept to themselves, as did Ejaz, Hinna, and their children. Razya and Noor were confined to their homes unless a male member of their household was available to escort them. This was not especially onerous, as they had generally been inclined to observe such a principle for most of their lives, though not rigorously. Having to wear the head-to-toe [burkha](#) was quite a different matter, as was being forced into any behavior relating to their day-to-day conduct, however much they may have agreed or disagreed with it. How they dressed was less important to them than who determined it. As with most women, for Razya and Noor, it was a matter of freedom, and though they understood the demands of [Islam](#) on personal compulsory behavior, such compulsion needed to come from within instead of being in a legal code.

As conditions became more stifling, Ejaz and Hinna decided it was time to leave Laghar Juy. They would move to be near Yaqub's family, where they would be in the slightly more liberal Pakistan. Two days before their departure, displeased with their decision, Saleem vented his frustration on his poor mother. Noor had stepped out of the house alone for a moment, when he rebuked her harshly for being unaccompanied. She was outraged and complained bitterly that her departed [shaheed](#), Abdus Sami, would never have tolerated such behavior from his son. When the time came, she packed a few belongings and left with Ejaz and Hinna. But the bonds that tied her to her home and village were simply too strong and she returned a week later, though still irritated with Saleem.



Despite the greater modernity and sophistication in towns and cities, women's lives in places such as Kabul and Jalalabad fared much worse than in villages. Professional women, including doctors and teachers, were dismissed in large numbers and driven underground or confined to their homes.

During this turbulent ascendancy of the [Taliban](#), Osama Bin Laden's Saudi citizenship was revoked after he issued several openly critical comments about King Fahd, for having backed the Palestinian-Israeli Oslo Accords. Finally, in May of 1996, after a series of botched attacks on Egyptian leaders, his welcome in the Sudan was exhausted and he was ordered to leave.

With a stalemate in the Panjshir between the [mujahideen](#) of Ahmed Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance and the [Taliban](#), Massoud, invited Bin Laden to return to Afghanistan to mediate between the parties. On his way into Afghanistan, Bin Laden met with Mullah Omar and was so taken by him that a lasting friendship began. Bin Laden was persuaded to throw his weight behind the [Taliban](#), leaving the conflict in place and Massoud with a new enemy.



Rabia and Sikander paid visits to Ejaz and Hinna in the Aka [Khel](#) mountains. They enjoyed watching Ayub, Adam, and Azhar play together while the parents debated the politics of their two countries and the world at large. Rabia's second child, Qayyum, was born in June 1996.

By September of that year, with the exception of the Panjshir Valley, still in Massoud's hands along with the territory he held in the north, the country finally succumbed to the [Taliban](#). One of their early actions after capturing Kabul was to seek retribution for Najibullah's excesses. [Taliban](#) forces summarily dragged him and his brother from the UN compound, executed them, and hanged their bodies from a traffic kiosk. This form of execution and corpse-display became the gruesome trademark of [Taliban](#) retribution as a warning to others.

It was in December of 1996, four years since Javed's passing, that Sikander and Jamil renamed Wahid Electric to Javed Electrical Industries—contracted to “Javelin”—in honor of their late father. Javelin continued to grow its customer base in the military and private sectors. Increasingly, the latter became involved in programs of infrastructure development throughout Pakistan, under the direction of Nawaz Sharif, following his election as prime minister in early 1997. With the brothers at the helm, it was on its way to becoming one of the largest national wholesalers of electrical products in the country.



Osama Bin Laden reactivated training camps all along the Pakistan border from near Qandahar up to Nangarhar, readying his recruits from around the world, but in particular from Saudi Arabia. Because it impeded the realization of a pan-Islamic caliphate, the anathema of non-Muslim, American troops in the holy “land of the [Haramain](#)” had to be opposed by militant [jihad](#), as far as he and his followers were concerned.

Over the previous several years, Bin Laden and others had embraced a specialized version of [Islam](#), a narrow branch of [Salafism](#) labeled by others as [Takfiri](#). It was based on the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, a one-time Egyptian intellectual. Qutb drew his conclusions from the eighteenth-century teachings of Abdul Wahhab, who had himself been a follower of the medieval polymath and scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah, a proponent of highly conservative views about the “pure” form of [Islam](#). Qutb was also a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which had at one time tried to assassinate Egyptian premier, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser had him executed in 1966 after a lengthy jail sentence.

Going beyond conventional [Salafism](#), Qutb's interpretation held that all so-called Muslims who had departed from what he believed were the strict forms of practice established from the period of the Prophet and his immediate successors—the “salaf” period—were in a state of “[jahiliyyah](#),” or tacitly embraced ignorance and opposition to truth. As a result, they were to be considered [apostates](#), and according to interpretations by contemporary scholars such as [Maulana](#) Maududi, punishment by death was permissible upon such people. A number of political movements generally labeled [Salafist](#) sought political change based on these principles. Though himself not a [Salafist](#), Maududi and others' opinions on apostasy gave license to followers of

[Salafist](#) ideology to kill without compunction people they deemed to be ill-professed Muslims.

By contrast, several other Muslim scholars had written on the impermissibility of killing even professed [apostates](#), much less those determined as such by the judgments of an extremist few. A more subtle middle ground of opinion also existed that held that apostasy was not grounds for a death penalty, but the active promulgation of a non-Muslim way of life by an [apostate](#) was, as this could be likened to treason given the absence of a separation of church and state in the Islamic conception of a Muslim state. However, for [Salafists](#) holding the death-to-any-[apostate](#) view, such reasoning had no merit. They were therefore referred to as [Salafi-Takfiris](#), owing to their pronouncement of “[takfir](#)” on other Muslims, effectively declaring them “[kafirs](#),” or infidels. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s [Salafi-Takfiri](#) ideology had consolidated its grip over al-Qaeda in the near seven years since its emergence from the old [Maktab-ul-Khidmat](#).

[Takfiri](#) reasoning effectively granted permission to commit terrorist acts resulting in indiscriminate killing. Even if they involved killing of Muslims, the victims would either be [apostates](#) and worthy of death or, as “true” Muslims, Allah would accept them as martyrs. The 1993 World Trade Center attack was arguably the first act committed by this movement against the United States. However, the attacks that first drew world attention to the al-Qaeda banner took place five years later in early August of 1998—the bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-as-[Salaam](#), which put Osama Bin Laden on the FBI’s ten most wanted list. Two weeks after the bombings, President Bill Clinton ordered cruise missiles to be launched from the Arabian Sea at several locations along the Afghan border with Pakistan, where Bin Laden’s training camps were located. Neither Bin Laden nor any of his close deputies were killed. Similar attacks on Sudan hit the El-Shifa pharmaceutical plant, producer of half that country’s pharmaceuticals. The United States, however, alleged that it was a chemical weapons factory.



When the news reports in Pakistan made public the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan, Sikander was bewildered. He couldn’t imagine why the United States would take such a step against the very country it had been helping only a few years earlier. He rationalized that the precision of the weapons meant that America was at least being careful not to incur unnecessary deaths, and that the terrorists of al-Qaeda were the targets, not the Afghans in general.

Sikander did wonder, though, how the [Taliban](#) government of Afghanistan would view such an attack on people that it considered its guests. In [melmasthia](#), allowing an attack upon a guest brought intolerable disgrace upon a host, no matter how deserving of punishment the guest might be. Retaliation was imperative to avoid the dishonor being complete.

By early 1999, Javelin had broadened its supply sources and added more locations around Pakistan. Jamil increasingly demonstrated his managerial skills, and spearheaded the computerization of their product catalogue and several business processes, greatly improving Javelin’s cost structure.

At home in Hayatabad, life was good for the most part. Jamil was married to Kausar, and Sameena had married Wasim, and was already mother to a young daughter named Rukhsana.

The U-shaped configuration originally conceived for their house by Javed and Sofie, reflected an ideal of having the growing families of both sons living under one roof with their parents. Sikander lived with Rabia and their children in the north wing, while Jamil and Kausar took the south. Sameena’s place was with her in-laws. Occupying the front, connecting north and south wings were to have been Javed and Sofie, expecting in their twilight years to see a growing brood of grandchildren. Left to pursue this ambition on her own now, few things pleased Sofie more than to be able to play with, dote upon, and buy toys and clothes for the grandchildren. Sofie often reflected wistfully that Javed’s hard work had led to no such reward for him; he had passed on without ever laying eyes on a single grandchild.

The bond between Rabia and Sofie grew deeper. More a friend than a daughter-in-law, Rabia was always happy to accompany Sofie on trips to meet a friend, or go shopping in Peshawar. Rabia herself loved to shop anyway, especially for home furnishings, so this was never a challenge. Equally importantly, Rabia and Kausar became the best of friends.

Ayub, who was almost six, had begun school in Hayatabad, and while at home, he and Qayyum were looked after by an Afghan nanny named Atiya. A refugee from Qandahar, Atiya spoke perfect [Pashto](#) and acceptable Urdu.

With the success of Javelin, Sikander provided financial assistance enabling Abdul Rahman, Sabiha, and their children, Sadiq and Sohail, to migrate into Pakistan, as Ejaz and Hinna—who now had three children, with the birth of daughter Riffat—had done. Abdul Majeed and Saleem, however, remained in Afghanistan to become full-fledged members of the local [Taliban](#), enforcing their version of [Islam](#) with vigor.

To everyone’s regret but particularly Rabia’s, the older generation refused to leave Laghar Juy. In a bid to get them to change their minds, Rabia and Sikander decided to visit the village, taking Ayub and Qayyum, who had yet to meet their maternal grandmother. This time they traversed the rough roads in their own Pajero over the Khyber Pass.

Even after eleven years since Sikander had last seen Afghanistan, imprinted in his mind were the images of the homes of Laghar Juy receding in the distance as he left behind the village that had transformed him from a boy to a man. He knew that things were very different now, but he couldn’t imagine any change in that image despite the passage of time, and the turmoil that had beset the country.

The vehicle wound its way up the Torkhum Road toward Landi Kotal and as the road turned north and split apart into its northbound and southbound lanes, Sikander could just about recognize the compound into which he had been driven on his first trip. On the hill stood the house from which he had departed to walk across the mountains, leading Neela. Now, for the first time, he was finally traveling along the entire length of this famous mountain pass. Once past Landi Kotal, after some dramatic and breathtaking switchbacks, they entered the small Afghan border town of Torkhum.

Thanks to Pakistan’s unwavering support for the [Taliban](#) before and since their rise to power, people coming from this direction were generally welcomed. However, the [Taliban](#) were naturally suspicious of external corrupting influences and offered no concessions to their strict dress code for women, which Rabia had to abide by. Prior to the [Taliban](#), dress styles and head covering had been a matter of family custom and Rabia’s family had been content with [shalwar](#), [qamees](#) and [dupattha](#). But after moving to Pakistan, she had slowly grown to prefer the increasingly common [hijab](#), which seemed to find acceptance in middle-class company there. Returning now to her native land however, it was time to don her brand new royal blue [burkha](#) with the embroidered top and crocheted meshed viewing panel, through which she would have to peer while out in public.

Though gruesome, a benefit of the times was that [Taliban](#) punishment was designed to be vigorously deterrent and not simply to “fit” a crime in some kind of equitable exchange. That this lesson had been learned the hard way was evidenced by severed limbs left hanging by the roadside with labels warning that their erstwhile owners had been bandits. Robbery of all kinds dwindled to a fraction of its level under warlord rule almost

immediately. Sikander and Rabia could take their children in safety toward Laghar Juy.

Once they reached Batawul, they drove off the road into nearby Anarbagh. From his first time in Afghanistan, Sikander had learned of Razya's uncle, Zubair, who lived in the village, and being unfamiliar with the routes into Laghar Juy from this direction Sikander wanted to seek Zubair's assistance in getting there. He also wanted the [melmasthia](#) protection that would no doubt come with such assistance.

He parked the Pajero, looking for anyone who might direct him to Zubair's place. A small throng gathered around the vehicle, mostly out of curiosity, the closest of them peering inside. Although Rabia was a child of these parts, she had already spent long enough away from her native culture to feel uneasy at this level of attention. Finally, two [Taliban](#) youths approached the vehicle, brushing everyone else aside. After giving them his name, Sikander let on that he had fought against the Russians together with people from these parts years ago and was looking for Zubair. The introduction proved effective, as one of the youths offered to direct him. Rabia gave up her seat and moved to the back as the youth sat next to Sikander. Once there, the youth stepped out, went into the house and a moment later, emerged with the surprised old man.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum](#), Uncle Zubair!" Sikander spoke a little more loudly than normal, while offering a hug. "I'm Sikander [Khan](#), who had come here many years ago to fight the Russians with Abdul Latif and his sons and nephews. He's married to your niece Razya."

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#)," responded a somewhat bewildered Zubair, while accepting the hug, as he acknowledged his niece and her husband from Laghar Juy.

"We're here from Pakistan as the guests of Abdul Latif and Razya, and we'd like to be shown the way to his place if you would please guide us," asked Sikander. His reiteration of Abdul Latif's name and the word "guest" brought a warm expression to Zubair's face. It confirmed the harmlessness of the visitors and bound their host to safeguard them.

"Sikander [Khan](#)! You are most welcome, brother. We shall be pleased to guide you to the house of my niece, but first, please sit with us and have some [chai](#)."

Refusal would have been grossly impolite. The higher a guest's station in life, the more important the host would seem to his neighbors and others in the village. This fact was not lost on Zubair and with the Pajero in full view of those neighbors he wanted to make the most of it.

After tea, Zubair asked one of his neighbor's sons, a young [Taliban](#) by the name of Tayyab, who himself had a cousin in Laghar Juy, to escort the family.

Rabia resumed her seat in the rear so that no issues of impropriety would arise. Within an hour, the Pajero was driving up the rough sloping streets of Laghar Juy and finally reached the familiar stretch in the higher elevations where Abdul Latif's house was situated. Tayyab got out of the vehicle and indicated Abdul Latif's home, toward which Sikander had already begun to stride. Rabia kept a small but appropriate distance from him, holding the two young boys' hands on each side of her. Tayyab bid his [salaams](#) before walking down the slopes a few hundred meters to his cousin's place to stay until he would be needed for the return trip.

Sikander entered the house and called out, "[Assalaamu 'alaykum](#)? Anyone home?"

"Who's there?" came back a voice, quickly followed by a tall Afghan, wearing a black turban with broad white stripes and a black [gamees](#) and [shalwar](#), emerging from beyond the entryway. His long, bushy beard was virtually identical to the one worn by the young man who had escorted them out of Anarbagh. The man and the family group gazed upon each other, briefly transfixed.

"Ab...Abdul Majeed! Don't you recognize your relatives anymore? It's me—Sikander!" Sikander laughed and tried hard to reconcile his last image of Abdul Majeed with the one he now faced. It was after [maghrib](#) and Abdul Majeed had just completed the sunset prayer.

"Sikannderrr! You..."

Grinning broadly, Abdul Majeed approached Sikander to deliver an engulfing hug, clearly pleased with the visitors' presence. Sikander returned the gesture. Abdul Majeed looked at Rabia and the two boys, and then quizzically at Sikander. "Ahh! Ayub and...Qassim?"

"Qayyuum!" the three-year-old corrected enthusiastically.

"It's Qayyum," affirmed Rabia from behind her [burkha](#).

"Qayyum! That's right." Abdul Majeed turned to face Rabia but kept his gaze lowered as he acknowledged her politely. Sikander observed how like Abdul Latif his son had now become.

"Rabia! It's been such a long time. Welcome! Welcome! Please, sit down while I call [Aba'i](#) and [Abaa](#) and...Fatima, my uh, my wife. They're in the back finishing up with [salaat-ul-maghrib](#)."

"Your...*what*? When did this happen, Abdul Majeed? You didn't invite *us* to your wedding?" Sikander asked, half-seriously indignant.

"Ah, I...um...it all happened pretty quickly with my uncle's cousin's daughter. We didn't even have an engagement," he offered meekly, with an apologetic smile.

Sikander nodded sympathetically. But through the mesh in her [burkha](#) Rabia faced Abdul Majeed squarely. "No, Brother Abdul Majeed, you don't get off so lightly with your cousin! There'll be a [badal](#) for this."

Half serious, Rabia recognized that this time of reunion was not a moment for displays of acrimony, but she was genuinely cut by not being invited to her cousin's wedding.

"[Abaa! Adey!](#)" Abdul Majeed called out, "Come and see! Sikander's here! Fatima!"

Abdul Latif and Razya were not long in coming. By most interpretations of the [Qur'an](#), her age permitted her to not to be veiled, but Razya wore a [burkha](#) just the same. Fatima followed them in.

"Sikannderrr! Raaabia!" cried out Abdul Latif. "[W'Allahi](#), so good to see you after so long. And you have your boys with you [mashAllah](#). Sikander, they're just like you!" Abdul Latif hugged Sikander tightly and turning to his niece he stroked the top of her [burkha](#). He could clearly see from the motion of the fully covered figure that she was crying. It was more than he or anyone else could bear and for a short while, the weeping spread around the room.

The joyous reunion had clearly awoken memories of happier times that contrasted starkly with the present. It was an unspoken lament for the sad demise of what was once a vibrant, united village. Although its energy had faced down and beaten an immeasurably better-equipped foe, the village was now dark and riven by fear under the repressive strictures of a force bent on protecting the soul, with the threat of physical violence if need be, to provide that protection.

Were souls protected? Who could say? One thing was clear, however. The greater these efforts were, the more elusive any soul for the place as a whole proved to be. Laghar Juy had truly been drained of its spirit, and that of Abdul Latif's own family seemed to be flowing out of the village as manifestly as the village stream. Such a loss merited mourning and the family instinctively understood it even as their conscious minds did not.

For all the repression and fear, Abdul Majeed and Saleem had not transformed into bad men. Neither had many [Taliban](#). For most of them, their love

had not vacated them as if they were zombies. They had simply concocted for themselves a system of guiding principles that led them to behave in a way that, at least in their conviction, would result in a better society. They were not to be compared with the murderous, raping warlords who had preceded them. The [Taliban](#) were a reaction to all of that. To *them*, the demands of a secure, orderly, and peaceful society that comported with their unique precepts of [Islam](#), left little room for personal liberty. With unbridled authority, however, even saints could turn into sinners, and there were clearly elements of the [Taliban](#) who appeared to revel in meting out harsh punishments for any infraction.

“Where’s Usman?” asked Sikander.

Abdul Latif pursed his lips. “It would have been a couple of years ago that he left the village and got married. He’s somewhere in Khost again, his birthplace, you know.”

“Do you hear from him?” asked Sikander, disappointed.

“Sometimes,” responded Abdul Latif. “Must be at least a year since the last time. Thankfully, that family’s on the rise again. They actually just had a son.” He shook his head wistfully. “When you think about all that he and his family went through, it’s a wonder he’s as cheerful as he is. We miss that around here.”

“May we go to see [Aba’i](#) now?” asked Rabia. Abdul Latif acknowledged the eagerness in Rabia’s voice.

Having decided that everyone should go, it took a few moments to prepare and soon the family group was outside Noor’s. Before entering, and without mentioning who else was with him, Abdul Latif called out to warn Noor to prepare herself for non-[mehrums](#). After hastily donning her [burkha](#), Noor replied that Saleem was not at home but that she was ready for them to enter.

“[Aaaadey!](#)” moaned Rabia as she ran toward her long-unseen mother.

“[Ya-Allah!](#) Raaabia! Rabia, my dearest. Oh, it’s been so long!” Noor exclaimed, both shocked and delighted. The two women hugged each other and cried. For a moment, their surreally wobbling, sack-like forms made Sikander almost chuckle at the comedy of the image, but its tragic quality abated the urge just as quickly.

Sikander approached and lowered his head for his mother-in-law to bless him. When she saw their two young sons, Noor wept with renewed impulse as she stretched out her hands to draw them closer.

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#),” said Ayub, knowing only that this was the right thing to do to please the grown-ups in the room.

“Asslamlkum.” Qayyum, knowing even less, struggled with so many syllables. Nonetheless, their utterances earned them warm hugs from their grandmother as she continued to weep joyfully at finally meeting them.

For several minutes, the commotion continued. When it died down, the family sat cross-legged on the floor in relative peace, while Rabia decided to make tea.

Rabia, society wife of a wealthy Peshawar entrepreneur, fluent speaker of [Pashto](#), Urdu, and English, wearing her [burkha](#), retreated to the back of her mother’s mud-brick home and began preparing tea on a crude charcoal stove. She lit the fire. It was a simple physical act but it became a key, unlocking happy memories of her childhood and teenage years, even in the face of war. While the water heated, she gazed at the walls, into the backyard, and in just about every direction as warm memories enveloped her like a womb.

Abdul Majeed left the house to look for Saleem, who was out patrolling the locality to make sure everyone’s behavior was within religious limits. He had been hand picked by regional authorities of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to represent it in the area around Laghar Juy. Eventually the two of them entered the house and with a broad grin Saleem embraced his onetime Stinger class fellow. Saleem looked much as he had done on the last occasion the two men had met in Pakistan. He offered his condolences at the passing of Javed and sat on the floor beside Sikander, chatting about how things had evolved over the years in Laghar Juy. Naturally, his focus was on the law and order that had finally arrived, and on how the opium growing was now a thing of the past. He was genuinely thankful on behalf of the village for the means to generate electricity that had been donated by Sikander and his father before him.

Sikander was wise enough not to get embroiled in an ideological debate with his two young [Taliban](#) friends and hosts. He simply wanted to reconnect with them and try to persuade Abdul Latif, Razya, and Noor to come back with him to Pakistan. That conversation started after dinner.

Eyeing his former mentor intently, Sikander began, “It’s really great to see you again after so long. I know that most of the resupply runs to Nangarhar have stopped since the Americans have left, but we still need to see you from time to time, you know.”

“[W’Allahi](#), Sikander, I understand and truly I’d like to get over there but circumstances don’t permit it. I have no sponsorship, no transportation. I’m sorry but I just don’t have the means to come.” Abdul Latif replied.

Sikander studied the aging face, understanding something of the hurt that Abdul Latif obviously felt from not having the freedom to come and go to Pakistan as he did before. The fearsome [Taliban](#) rule had reduced this man to a fraction of his former stature. Sikander knew that any proposal he might make would have to be sensitive to Abdul Latif’s need to preserve what was left of his dignity.

“Well, brother, what if I could let you borrow my vehicle? If I were to arrange for it to be delivered to this village for your use, would you be willing to come? To come and go as you please? Would that be a way to solve the transport problem?” Sikander didn’t wait for an answer. “I know that driving isn’t something you like to do, so why not bring Abdul Majeed or Saleem, and, of course, Sister Razya and [Aba’i](#)? We need you, too. We need you to be with us at least some of the time as our children grow. Would you do that? For us?”

“Sikander,” Abdul Latif replied hesitantly, “what you’ve said tonight, what you’ve done today in coming... It’s truly wonderful that you thought to do this and I would love to come and visit you in Peshawar. But we cannot leave our home in Laghar Juy—”

“Brother, we understand that it will only be for visits and we won’t ask you to abandon your sons or village—” interjected Sikander.

“—because we’re committed,” continued Abdul Latif as if without interruption, “to Abdul Majeed and Saleem, who are also our children. Whatever they do, whatever they think they want to do, they will always be our sons. Your offer is very kind,” he replied, indicating, without formally saying it, his acceptance. His sense of [badal](#) was working hard to rationalize how to achieve an exchange for the enormous favor offered to him. It was difficult for Sikander to convey to Abdul Latif how much he and Rabia saw the mere act of being visited as the greatest favor possible.

“[Adey](#), what about you? Won’t you also please join your grandchildren and us? At least some of the time?”

Her plaintive gaze into her mother’s eyes—a gaze unseen but absorbed all the same by her mother—elicited yet more quiet tears from Rabia. She blotted her cheeks with the fabric of her [burkha](#), revealing her condition with a small but eloquent stain.

Noor was too overcome to do more than nod. She motioned for Rabia to go into the back where the [burkhas](#) could be removed and they could have the intimacy the situation deserved. Razya and Fatima joined them.

Rabia embraced her mother, then Razya, and finally, Fatima. Noor was only too pleased to agree to visit her daughter and her Pakistani family. The conversation was quickly over on that matter, liberating Rabia to unleash her inveterate curiosity on an unsuspecting Fatima. She needed to know

everything about her cousin-in-law with no detail left unvisited.

After another hour or so of careful and therefore harmless conversation, it was time to perform the [isha](#) prayer and prepare for bed. Sikander and Rabia combined [maghrib](#) and [isha](#).

The following morning, the family regrouped with the women again donning their [burkhas](#) after separately eating breakfast. The discussion resumed about visiting Peshawar. It would have been unseemly to drag off the senior relatives on this trip without any forewarning, so Sikander agreed to have the vehicle sent in two weeks, and Saleem would bring back Abdul Latif, Razya, Noor, and Rabia, who, as Sikander learned, had been easily persuaded to stay at her mother's place with the children and come back with them all. Although mildly annoyed at the surprise, he acquiesced reluctantly.

"Are you going to be all right here? You don't have a lot of clothes with you. And the children? Will they manage?" Having agreed to their stay already, Sikander held out some hope that a good reason might emerge leading everyone to see how inadvisable it would be. He really didn't want to be without Rabia and his boys.

"Clothes?" asked Rabia, in signature sarcasm. She spread her gloved hands and tipped her head as if examining her [burkha](#)-clad form from top to bottom. Her meaning was clear as she directed a glare at Abdul Majeed.

Abdul Majeed shifted his posture awkwardly. He and Saleem glanced around the room to see who else might be turning to either of them to ask why all this was necessary.

"Well, it's settled then. Tomorrow I'll return to Peshawar and send back the Pajero for you in about two weeks."

The next day, Sikander picked up Tayyab and drove back to Anarbagh. When they arrived, Zubair arranged a courtesy escort back to Torkhum, leaving Sikander to drive on to Peshawar alone.

The two weeks went by slowly for Sikander, but he busied himself during the period. Finally, unwilling to send anyone else, he took the Pajero back himself and returned with his own family, Abdul Latif, Razya, Noor and Saleem. It was a tight squeeze, especially for Ayub and Qayyum. From then on, the vehicle was at Abdul Latif's disposal and though technically loaned, it was in all but name, a gift. Sikander, who hardly needed to worry about the cost, procured a newer one within the week. Abdul Latif and the family could now come and go as they pleased.

It was not long after this that wireless GSM cell phone service became available in Afghanistan and direct communication with Laghar Juy was finally possible. Though the service was far from reliable, it made planning for trips much easier, and Rabia used it to speak to her mother frequently.



Five hundred kilometers away from Peshawar, down in Tarnak near Qandahar, Osama Bin Laden had been the target of American retaliation the prior year, and his need for [badal](#) was all consuming. Giving vent to it, Bin Laden began planning a response. Two plans emerged. The first was directed at the source of the Tomahawk missiles that had attacked the camps—namely ships in the Arabian Sea. Being ancestrally Yemeni, it had particularly angered him that the missiles had been launched from his own home territory. He appointed Abdul-Rahim al-Nashiri and Abu 'Ali al-Harithi to flesh out this plan.

The second plan was a dusted down redesign of one presented to him about five years earlier by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in Pakistan. The argument had been that Khalid's nephew Ramzi Yousef's attempt at hitting the World Trade Center in 1993 had been ineffectual. With a different approach, those and other landmarks could be hit successfully. This would not only exact revenge for the missile attacks but also strike at American prestige. The plan called for the use of fully fueled aircraft as cruise missiles. It had been casually entertained in 1995 but not taken seriously. Now Khalid had modified it to use passenger airliners and even had a non-U.S. component, targeting Asian locations with those hijackers unable to obtain U.S. visas. Having established Khalid as the architect of the plan, Bin Laden put it into action, finding hijackers who could be relied upon to execute it, and organizing whatever flight training and logistics might be necessary. A body blow was to be delivered to the United States of America.

Meanwhile, in May, a major flare-up of tensions between India and Pakistan arose when Pakistani-backed militias moved against the town of Kargil, just to the south of the so-called Line-of-Control in Kashmir. The advance was ostensibly by irregulars and local [mujahideen](#) seeking liberation of Kashmir from Indian rule, but was heavily backed by units of Pakistan's regular army. The conflict lasted until August of that year, resulting in all gains made by the offensive being given up under a torrent of international condemnation against Pakistan's allegedly brazen move. By making it appear to be an opportunistic land-grab by Pakistan for Kashmir, India managed to deflect attention away from any legitimate claim by Kashmiri separatists that might have caught the attention of the international community.

Prime minister Nawaz Sharif was blindsided by the Kargil offensive and claimed only to learn of it from an irate Indian premier, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Sharif was especially embarrassed in light of the Lahore Declaration of earlier that year, in which India and Pakistan had agreed to seek a peaceful resolution on Kashmir, an issue that had dogged relations between the two nuclear-armed countries since their independence from the British in 1947. Sharif's generals had different ideas and with such policy differences laid bare, the rift between him and the army simply grew.

Indeed, only four generals had conceived of the plan and knew about its details and one of them was a friend of Omar [Khan](#), Sameena's father-in-law. He had come to know Omar when they had been [SSG](#) officers. The general's name was Pervez Musharraf and he was the Army's Chief of Staff and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Sikander had met Musharraf long ago, when Sameena had invited Rabia and himself to one of Wasim's family functions that Musharraf had also attended. Back then, Musharraf had held the rank of major general.

In October, Now four-star General Musharraf was on a PIA flight back from Sri Lanka when Nawaz Sharif tried to remove him as Army Chief of Staff, seeking to replace him with Ziauddin Butt. Sharif ordered that the flight carrying Musharraf not be allowed to land in Karachi but divert instead to Nawab Shah, some 200 kilometers north of its scheduled destination. From the aircraft, Musharraf countermanded Karachi's air traffic control and forced the aircraft to circle the skies above the city. While it ran dangerously low on fuel, Musharraf managed to contact senior army officers, and urged them to intervene with a coup. The urging worked, and with Nawaz Sharif summarily removed from power, the generals ordered that the airliner be allowed to land. Musharraf disembarked and assumed the position of the country's chief executive, effectively terminating once again Pakistan's most recent tinkering with democracy.



After the coup, Sikander was invited to a dinner at his mother's cousin's home. The cousin's name was Zainab whose son, Salman [Khan](#), lived in Durham, North Carolina, with his French-American wife, Sabrina. Salman had established a software business in 1988, which was now prospering. A young man of thirty-three, he was slim, clean-shaven, and wore thick eyeglasses. He was on a short visit to see his mother while on his way back to the USA from a business trip to Nagoya, Japan. A naturalized American citizen, speaking English without an accent, he nonetheless enjoyed many of his native Pakistani traditions, including relaxing in a traditional [shalwar](#) and [qamees](#). Sikander found him intriguing. He introduced himself and explained how the two were related to each other.

"Brother Salman, how long have you lived in the USA?"

"Mmm...a little over sixteen years, Sikander. Why?" he responded.

"Just curious." Sikander recalled his long-standing yearning to see America. It had increased as a result of the help given by the United States to the [mujahideen](#), even though recent developments had dampened his feelings. "I've always wanted to visit that country, maybe even live there one day. Do you enjoy living there?"

"Sabrina and I *love* living in North Carolina. It's a beautiful place, especially in the spring and autumn. The people there are very friendly and it's a welcoming place for someone with any brains, if they know how to put them to use. Actually, Sikander, America's one of the few places on earth where if you can offer something of value, you'll usually find someone who recognizes and pays for it."

The conversation continued as Salman elaborated with vivid descriptions of the America he had grown to appreciate, wrapping up with: "It's also a great place to raise children. But look; before considering a move, why not visit first and see if it is the kind of place you imagine it to be?"

Rabia's ears pricked up at the comment about child-rearing. She tuned herself out of her ongoing conversation, giving all the appearance of listening while directing her attention to Salman and Sikander.

"...some pretty tough immigration laws. You'll need a green card. If you have close family, it can be done but it's a pretty long wait. It's easier if you have a job that requires you to work there or better still, if you invest money and set up a business, though I don't remember how much and what all the rules are. These things can generally be worked out," said Salman. "But you do need a good immigration lawyer to help you."

"Do you discuss Pakistan and Afghanistan over there?" Sikander was curious as to why the Americans had left Afghanistan to fend for itself after the Russians had left.

"You mean among ourselves, the expatriate Pakistanis, or generally with local people?" asked Salman.

"Either way, I suppose. It seems no one there is too concerned about what happens now that the Soviet Union is basically done."

"I'd say that's about the measure of it, Sikander. I mean, that scale of assistance wasn't out of generosity, was it? It was a matter of winning the Cold War and once that was done, Afghanistan was no longer an important part of the world. No oil. No gas. Perhaps some minerals, but really, mostly problems."

"Yes, I see what you're saying. What about people there from this part of the world? What do the Pakistanis you come across in the USA think about Afghanistan?"

"Actually, we don't generally discuss much beyond the prospects for Pakistan now that we're back 'under the generals' again." Salman smirked. "The common joke is that the country seems to be governed from the American embassy!" he continued, adding a cynical chuckle.

"Perhaps I'll visit sometime soon," Sikander said. "I'll have to see what the visa process here in Islamabad looks like. If I have to, would it be all right to use you as a sponsor? I've heard everyone needs a sponsor."

"Sure! We'd love to have you come. We could even make a vacation out of it and go see places I have to admit even we haven't seen yet. Bring your children, too. Sabrina and I have a little boy and girl. We could go to Disney World. That's not too far from North Carolina. I'm sure you and the family would enjoy it."

Sikander smiled and tried to imagine the places Salman had mentioned. His only meaningful reference was Applecross, which was as exotic as Salman's descriptions of America seemed to be. It was time he finally delivered on his long-standing promise to himself. He would visit America.



Chapter 13

Enduring Freedom

BY THE RECKONING OF MANY, a new millennium rolled in on January 1, 2000. Along with sighs of relief at the continued operation of virtually all key software throughout the world, dispute raged over whether another year had to pass before the third millennium could be considered to have started. Whatever the merits of that debate, Osama Bin Laden had a different conflict on his mind. On January 3, three thousand kilometers southwest of Peshawar, a guided missile destroyer, the *USS The Sullivans*, was moored in the harbor of Yemen's port city of Aden.

Named after the five Sullivan brothers who had lost their lives in World War II, the ship was a member of the mainstay Arleigh-Burke class of U.S. Navy destroyers, the launch platforms for the Navy's Aegis weapons system and related radar. In direct retaliation for the earlier missile attacks launched from such ships on Afghan training camps, Bin Laden's plan to attack such a destroyer while it was moored in Aden, was in place. With the *USS The Sullivans* stationed there, the mission was set in motion, and a small boat filled with explosives approached the ship.

Before it reached its target, however, with its heavy burden, the boat floated too low and began to take on water from waves lapping over its bow, adding further weight and rapidly exacerbating the problem. The vessel sank, leaving the destroyer unharmed. Although he was disappointed, Bin Laden was not about to abandon his objective. He needed a bigger boat. With this amendment in mind, he had his people draw up a new plan.



As the year wore on, Sikander and Rabia saw more of Abdul Latif, Razya, and Noor. On two occasions, even Abdul Majeed and Saleem came with them to meet their nephews and more of Sikander's family. Saleem finally got married to Amina, according to Rabia, a regally beautiful girl from Jalalabad. Fatima, meanwhile, gave birth to daughter, Latifa, named after her grandfather. Given both the Pajero and cellphone coverage, family visits and phone calls became more frequent than ever.



On October 12, another U.S. Aegis destroyer, the *USS Cole*, was moored in Aden harbor. It was there for a routine refueling that began at 10:30 a.m. Less than an hour later, a small boat approached the vessel laden with almost five hundred kilograms of high explosives. Even though it was headed straight for the Cole, rules of engagement at the time did not permit the duty watch crew to open fire on the boat. Just as the crew was lining up for lunch, an enormous explosion blew into the galley and other decks, creating a twelve-meter by twenty-meter gash. When the mayhem finally settled down, thirty-nine U.S. sailors were injured. Seventeen were dead.

In early November, Americans went to the polls. Amid much controversy about the vote count, and following a Supreme Court ruling on the matter, George W. Bush was named America's forty-third president, and assumed the presidency the following January. When he later received briefings on Bin Laden, he declared that he didn't want to respond to al-Qaeda one attack at a time and was "tired of swatting flies."

At about the same time, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's plans for what was then called the "planes operation" were well underway. The year before, he had been working with Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, two of the intended hijackers who would likely be able to get U.S. visas, together with members of a recently arrived group out of Hamburg, Germany, led by a young man called Mohammed Atta. Bin Laden selected Atta to be the overall plot execution leader and Khalid was named the planning leader. An elaborate system of communication between the two was established, with Ramzi bin al-Shibh as the primary go-between.

It was common for al-Qaeda to use the code word "wedding" for any terrorist attack. Before long, the loose references to the "planes operation" became more officially, "The Big Wedding," within al-Qaeda planning circles. With the key operational details worked out and teams in place, the hijackers required to pilot Boeing 757 and 767 aircraft were already in different parts of the United States obtaining training—in some cases, only refresher training—on flying airliners.

In Afghanistan, skirmishes and heavy fighting had become a routine occurrence between members of the Northern Alliance and the forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name given to the country by the [Taliban](#). Despite the fighting, there was relative peace in much of the rural parts of Nangarhar Province.



Although it had become a lot tougher, Sikander and Rabia still saw their extended family every other month. But in July, the Pajero, which had by now seen some rough times, became stuck in Afghanistan with a broken transmission. There was no easy way to bring it back immediately, so the families made do with the often patchy cell phone system. It was a poor consolation, and Rabia felt particularly troubled at being unable to see her mother. By September, succumbing to her scolding, Sikander promised his wife that as soon as he had a free moment he would look into the problem and see what might be done.



In early September following several days of heavy fighting, forces of the Northern Alliance led by Ahmed Shah Massoud conceded some districts in Kapisa Province. On September 8, Massoud moved back to Khwaja Bahauddin in Takhar Province. The next day, he granted a media interview. Despite claims of being a Moroccan-born Belgian, the reporter was in fact Tunisian and carried a stolen camera filled with explosives. The explosion killed the cameraman immediately and an injured Massoud died within the day after emergency treatment failed. The reporter was also injured, though he had doubtless expected to die. Any such expectation was met when after being captured he allegedly tried to escape and was shot and killed.

Two days after Massoud's death, despite reported warnings from Jordan, Italy, Israel, Pakistan, and others, as well as several alerts from within

U.S. security and intelligence circles throughout 1999 to 2001, on September 11, the United States was caught by surprise.



At about a quarter to seven in the evening of that day, while Rabia and Sofie were in the lounge playing with the boys, Sikander was at home, settling down to relax with a magazine. He had just begun reading when he heard the screeching sound of tires then a loud banging on the home's steel gates.

"Open up! Open up! Hurry!" came the frantic voice from outside. It was Jamil, returning home after staying late at the office. He was expected back around this time but with far less commotion. Kausar heard him and hurried to open the gate as Jamil returned to his car to drive through the opening. After parking it, he ran into the house, calling for his brother.

Kausar followed her husband, irritated by his ignoring her as he barreled into the dwelling.

"Sikander [bhai](#)! Sikander [bhai](#)!"

Sikander hurried out of the lounge.

"Sikander [bhai](#)... CNN! Switch on CNN!"

"What? What is it?" asked an alarmed Sikander.

"Please, [bhai-jan](#)! Just turn it on. Turn it on! There have been attacks in America. The World Trade Center in New York. Hit by aircraft!"

"Jamil!" Sikander had barely absorbed his brother's words. "Calm down! An airplane hit the World Trade Center? Why...why do you say it was an attack? Couldn't it just have been—"

"[Bhai-jan](#), I didn't say *an* aircraft, I said aircraft! There have been two airliners flown into the towers and now there's smoke pouring out of them and...oh God! The people in there!"

"All right, come on."

Everyone hurried into the TV room. Kausar's indignation quickly evaporated as she absorbed the gravity of what Jamil had described. Sofie and Rabia had heard the commotion, and sensing something was amiss, Sofie directed Atiya to get the children off to bed.

As the picture took shape on the screen, news anchor Carol Lin was describing a third aircraft having hit the Pentagon, when the video image cut away from the studio to a street in New York. People were screaming and running away from the burning buildings.

And then the unthinkable happened.

Slowly, surreally, as if some evil, unseen hand had opened a giant trap door beneath it, the south tower appeared to sink into the ground. What had a moment earlier been a pall of billowing black smoke streaming away from the building became a giant inverted mushroom cloud of dense gray smoke and dust followed by debris and paper. Millions of pieces of paper. Some were laden with meaning; others had meaningless doodles scribbled amid yawns at the start of another boring meeting just an hour earlier. Yet others, blank and seeking meaning, now acquired one neither imagined nor imaginable. Together they descended, fluttering and wafting like so many white autumn leaves into the foul gray dust accumulating rapidly below.

The dust engulfed everything on the ground, blotting out the sun and the pristine lapis lazuli of that fateful New York sky. About half an hour after the first tower fell, now all too imaginably, the north tower followed suit. Now in the space where two buildings holding almost twenty thousand people had been standing just a couple of hours earlier, only one thing remained. Air.

The family was pinned to the TV all night. According to talk show hosts, commentators, and analysts, all signs pointed to al-Qaeda and only one place on earth. Afghanistan.

By early morning in Peshawar, which was the evening of September 11, in Washington, George W. Bush delivered a speech on national TV, seen live throughout an increasingly worried world that included Peshawar. Over the airwaves came chilling words: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

Sikander's family, having lost a night's sleep, stared anxiously at each other when Bush's speech was over.

The attacks resulted in the loss of almost three thousand lives from over eighty countries. They also liberated the U.S. government to do whatever it felt was needed to address the threat of al-Qaeda and, to the extent American interests were otherwise at stake, to pursue the adventure anywhere in the world that circumstances dictated. Speculation mounted about counterattacks on Afghanistan or raids to seek out and kidnap or kill Bin Laden and his entourage. Whether or not the United States wished to be back in Afghanistan, it *would* be back. And this time, directly.

Sikander and Rabia called Abdul Latif whenever they got the chance, just to be sure that things were all right, but communications grew more patchy than normal, with calls often being dropped due to circuit overloads. From what he and Rabia learned in their snippets of conversation with him, Abdul Majeed and Saleem were joining other [Taliban](#) to the west of Laghar Juy up in the [Spin Ghar](#) region. Sikander urged them to avoid any place likely to be a target for American attacks. At the time, he imagined an American response involving Tomahawk cruise missiles, similar to those following the embassy bombings. Sikander tried to persuade Abdul Latif to bring everyone over to the Pakistan side of the border to join Abdul Rahman and Ejaz. Abdul Latif said they would consider it, but Abdul Majeed and Saleem refused to hear of anything resembling abandonment of their fellow [Taliban](#) brothers.

All attention was focused on the likely U.S. response as American public opinion now clearly anticipated that it would be comprehensive and, contrary to Sikander's more naïve hopes, not simply another round of cruise missiles fired at a few training camps. In Peshawar, as elsewhere, this was the only subject on people's minds and lips.

Five days after the New York attacks, Sikander was in the office mulling over the scenarios that loomed over Pakistan and Afghanistan for the coming weeks and months. There was incessant chatter about how terrible the attacks had been, how years of bad U.S. foreign policy had created the monster that had attacked it, how this would affect life in Pakistan, how India might capitalize on the situation, and, of course, how everything had been secretly organized by the U.S. government anyway. The existence of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century received wide exposure in Pakistan as further evidence of the "conniving ways of the Americans." Indeed, conspiracy theories were ripening just about everywhere, from society functions to sports events to local [kebab](#) and [paan](#) stalls, to say nothing of every taxicab in Peshawar. Every individual, no matter their station in life, seemed to have inside knowledge of what the Americans had really done and how the whole thing had been a set up.

It wasn't long before Sikander was drawn into such a discussion with Jamil and Rehan at the office. He caught them in a conversation vying with each other as to whose theory was more Machiavellian.

"They wanted to create another Pearl Harbor for themselves," declared Jamil. "Now they can pretty much do as they please and everyone in their country will be too afraid to stop them."

Rehan nodded fiercely in agreement. “This has to be the work of the CIA. No doubt about it. And pretty soon—”

“Pretty soon you’ll run out of conspirators and conspiracies, Rehan!” interrupted Sikander’s voice from behind him.

“[Khan sahib](#)! I...I...didn’t—” stammered Rehan.

“Oh, relax, Rehan. I didn’t mean anything by it. But you’re talking about the wrong thing, you know. At least right now, instead of discussing how these things came about, we should be trying to understand what’s going to happen and what options there are. I’d begin with the facts before inventing conspiracies.”

“Meaning?” asked Jamil

Sikander looked at his watch, glanced over the mezzanine balcony, and saw that there was a lunchtime lull in customer activity in the sales section. He motioned to Rehan and Jamil to follow him into his office.

He was filled with anxiety, not least for his in-laws and his own considerable investment of time and risk to life and limb when fighting with the [mujahideen](#). It had been for their country’s freedom, yet Afghanistan was, in so many ways, also *his* adopted country. He needed to have this conversation, and Jamil and Rehan were engaged in the subject anyway. They would have to do.

Sikander ushered them into the office, closed the door, and motioned for them to take seats. Rehan and Jamil were ill at ease at being asked to indulge in what at most other times would have been seen as idle chitchat. But these were no ordinary times.

“Let’s accept that it’s only a matter of time before the Americans come in force,” began Sikander.

“Huh! Let ‘em try. It’ll be like the Russians! Easy to get in, hard to get out!” scoffed Rehan.

Sikander studied Rehan. He was an honest, hard worker with a heavyset build, a tar-colored mustache, broad black eyebrows, and slightly greasy hair—in sharp contrast to his brilliant white dress shirt and red tie. He looked every inch a Pakistani white-collar worker. He was a superb salesman and had a strong patriotic streak. But he had little idea how the Russians’ fate had unfolded over ten years ago and none whatsoever of what it took to achieve. With a hint of a frown, Sikander swiveled in his chair and returned to what he felt was the subject.

“Al-Qaeda is the target. It has to be destroyed. This much is clear,” he began. “It’ll require at the very least the key leaders...Bin Laden, Atef, and al-Zawahiri, and everyone else alleged to be involved with the New York attacks, to be surrendered to the U.S.”

“Yes, but—” began Jamil.

“—but the [Taliban](#) being who they are,” continued Sikander, “the Americans would fare better squeezing blood from stones before getting them to hand anyone over.”

Jamil nodded and Rehan swung his head from side to side, in characteristic sub-continental agreement.

“It’s the twenty-first century, but still, [Melmastia’s](#) alive and well.” Sikander said.

“In any case,” Jamil chimed in, “they’re itching to remove the [Taliban](#), so despite what they say, the Americans probably *don’t* want the [Taliban](#) to give up Bin Laden. Pushing this...this Mullah Omar into a corner by making non-negotiable demands to give up Bin Laden leaves him no room to comply without loss of face. That forces him to defend himself and al-Qaeda against an American onslaught. And there’s little doubt about how that’ll turn out.”

Sikander nodded. “So a plan requires either an impossibly deep rift to turn the [Taliban](#) against al-Qaeda, or else a devastation of the [Taliban](#) along with al-Qaeda. I can’t imagine a quick enough campaign to cause the necessary squabble between Bin Laden and Omar, which means that to destroy al-Qaeda, the [Taliban](#) must be ousted from power. And as you so aptly point out, Jamil, this is what the Americans want anyway. But that requires two more things.”

Rehan listened intently. Jamil and Sikander had clearly thought about the subject more deeply than he had.

“The first is to cut off their sustenance,” continued Sikander, “and the second is the installation of a credible alternative. Don’t forget that no one in their worst nightmare would be willing to stomach a return of the warlords and the lawlessness that came with them. Even Bush doesn’t want that.”

“So to dislodge the [Taliban](#)—” resumed Jamil, thinking aloud.

“—means focusing on Pakistan, the [Taliban’s](#) primary source of support,” Sikander filled in. “The Russians and Iranians are hardly likely to jump to the aid of the [Pashtuns](#), and pretty much all they get from the Saudis comes through Pakistan.”

“Hmm...so we should prepare to be attacked as well then?” offered Rehan.

“No! Well, I hope not.” Sikander couldn’t dismiss such a notion entirely. “I suppose that the United States will turn to Musharraf and ask him—convincingly—to discontinue support for the [Taliban](#). They’ll want us to stop supplying them and to block their escape from Afghanistan, or at the very least the escape of al-Qaeda people.”

“How will they persuade Musharraf?” asked Jamil.

“With a big carrot and a big stick.”

Sikander began speculating. “I’d be offering large payments to Musharraf and his military, and to Pakistan generally, and I’d be telling Pakistan that if we don’t acquiesce, we should expect to be bombed, or maybe India would get a signal that the United States would look the other way if they attacked us. Though I think with our nuclear weapons, the India card would be a tough one to play and a very high risk one at that.”

“Yes, but if India were to attack...” Jamil began building on Sikander’s thoughts, “Musharraf would have to deal with it, which would pave the way for America occupying Afghanistan and who knows, maybe even crossing into Pakistan, while Pakistan would be too preoccupied on its eastern front against India to do anything meaningful for the [Taliban](#).”

Sikander wasn’t ready to agree with Jamil. His thoughts shifted to other factors. “Even China wouldn’t want to cross the U.S. right now, so we can’t rely on our traditional Chinese allies to hold off an Indian advance or even to help us if they get a strong U.S. signal to remain out of it. But I do agree, a Pakistan preoccupied by an Indian offensive will be a Pakistan unable to support the [Taliban](#).”

“Actually, if the U.S. wants to distract Pakistan away from the [Taliban](#), it won’t need an Indian attack,” observed Jamil. “It would just need a threat of one.”

“Meaning?” asked Rehan.

Sikander filled in. “Some incident could be arranged which would spark a massive response from India. They would move several divisions up against the Pakistani border. Musharraf would have to respond, and as long as things don’t spill over into a nuclear conflict, a stalemate would sap his resources, leaving little or nothing to support the [Taliban](#),”

“So what do you think should happen next?” asked Rehan.

“I think Bush should probably convince Musharraf that any strategy other than wholehearted support for the U.S., including allowing the use of this country for getting equipment and supplies into Afghanistan, will be suicide.” Rehan and Jamil nodded.

“Do you think Musharraf can sell that to the public and more importantly, to his generals?” asked Rehan.

Sikander shrugged. “With enough sweeteners for the country and the generals. No matter what, though, I don’t think there’s a way to avoid a large attack on Afghanistan, and if the Northern Alliance people can put something coherent together, I’d be backing them with men and materials if I were Bush.”



Three days later, President Pervez Musharraf announced his decision to join the United States in its global war on terror. He had no choice, as he explained, because Pakistan could ill afford a U.S.-India axis against it.

While arguably an obvious decision, in the words of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, “it would be onerous” in its consequences. A Pakistani policy of support for the [Taliban](#) against the Northern Alliance had to be reversed abruptly, and that was something that deep loyalties on both sides would not readily permit. There were hundreds of Pakistani military personnel in Afghanistan, generally [ISI](#) military advisers. Besides, nearly seven years of presenting the [Taliban](#) in a positive light to the Pakistani public had been successful and could not be undone overnight.

Whatever the considerations, George W. Bush made things crystal clear in his speech of September 20 before a packed joint session of the U.S. Congress:

“The leadership of al-Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the [Taliban](#) regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan we see al-Qaeda's vision for the world. Afghanistan's people have been brutalized, many are starving, and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough. The United States respects the people of Afghanistan—after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid—but we condemn the [Taliban](#) regime. It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists.

“By aiding and abetting murder, the [Taliban](#) regime is committing murder. And tonight the United States of America makes the following demands on the [Taliban](#).

“Deliver to United States authorities all of the leaders of al-Qaeda who hide in your land.

“Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens you have unjustly imprisoned.

“Protect foreign journalists, diplomats, and aid workers in your country.

“Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan.

“And hand over every terrorist and every person and their support structure to appropriate authorities.

“Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.

“These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The [Taliban](#) must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists or they will share in their fate.”

A few days later, Pakistanis everywhere, particularly followers of the Jamiat ‘[Ulema](#)-e-Islam, began a march toward the Afghan border in support of the [Taliban](#) and al-Qaeda.

Two and a half weeks after President Bush’s pronouncements, US CENTCOM commander General Tommy Franks declared himself ready for the Afghanistan invasion. His plans were locked and loaded. Most of the world, sympathetic to the U.S. national tragedy, stood fully behind the mission of ousting the [Taliban](#) regime and catching the al-Qaeda leadership to bring it to justice.



Sikander was constantly connected to some news source or other—CNN at home and in his office, or the local radio in his car.

Late on October 7, he and his family were watching TV, as had now become inevitable, when reports came in of attacks on Afghanistan having begun. At ten o’clock that night in Peshawar, George W. Bush was back on TV announcing Operation Enduring Freedom.

Though their minds had been prepared for something like this, no one expected it to be that night and everyone was deeply anxious. Rabia could only think of her country and her family back home in Laghar Juy, but especially of her [Taliban](#) brother and cousin who were now the avowed focus of American rage. Through messy entanglement of circumstance, their deaths would become a matter of American policy. She arose and went into the quiet lounge, sat on a sofa, nestled her head against her forearm on the armrest, and sobbed.

Sikander followed her, not wanting her to be alone. Sitting next to her he laid a hand gently on her shoulder without saying a word. She didn’t acknowledge him at first, but after a while leaned into him to seek a solace he was powerless to give.

“I’m sure they’ll be all right, Rabia. The Americans have smart weapons and they know who they’re after. They won’t attack the general people. We should pray for everyone there. That’s what we can do.”

“Why?” cried Rabia. “Why couldn’t you have fixed the car, Sikander?” she pleaded through her sobbing. “Why didn’t you go there and bring them back?”

“Rabia, I...” How could he tell her that he’d been too busy and that he had no idea that terror attacks in New York were about to transform their world. “I’m sorry.”

Sikander pondered his options. Paralysis didn’t come easily to him. Surely there was something he could do? Slowly, an idea took shape.

“Rabia, I’ll get them. I’ll go, and I’ll bring them back. We managed to slip across the mountains when the Russians were there. I can do it by mule again if I can get in touch with Ejaz and Abdul Rahman. Let me try to get them back now.”

“No!” Rabia was clear about Sikander’s culpability in failing to do anything about the vehicle. However, she was also the mother of his two children and lady of the household. Losing him would put everything at risk and that did not seem like a good idea. Besides, she loved Sikander.

“We’ve no information. You heard Musharraf say that Pakistan’s now in America’s camp. Afghanistan is... it’s enemy territory now. It’s too risky!”

Sikander gazed at his wife’s strained but beautiful face. He was relieved to see her regained composure and more than a little pleased she was concerned for his wellbeing. “Rabia, I don’t want to do anything crazy either. Listen; let me talk to Arif and Junaid. I won’t do anything unless I can

reach out to them and get their help. How's that?"

Rabia paused. She weighed the possibility of getting through with [ISI](#) help, which even she knew would probably add considerably to the likelihood of success. "Do you think you can do that?" she asked, sniffing and wiping her tears with her wrist.

"I can try," promised Sikander. "I can certainly try."

The following morning, after a brief stop at his office Sikander got back into his car for the short drive to Arif's place. He turned on the radio. Being without the news for even a moment was intolerable. The news was bad.

In Peshawar, as in other cities in Pakistan, widespread rioting was reported as people protested the American offensive.

As he entered Jamrud and turned onto Warsak Dam Road, Sikander called Arif's cellphone.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum](#), Arif?" he began. "Are you home?"

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#), Sikander. I am indeed. Troubled times, eh? How goes it with you, old friend?"

"I'm fine, Arif, but I'm really worried about the family in Laghar Juy. Listen; I left them a vehicle, oh...about a year ago? And it's broken down.

They can't get out and join us here in Peshawar, which is really what we'd like with all that's happening."

"Hmm...yes...yes, I see but...well, you know what Musharraf's saying. I don't—"

"Oh, *screw* what *he's* saying, Arif!" retorted Sikander. "We need to help them get out. They're my friends and relatives! They're *your* friends! We have to do something."

"All right! All right, look uh, let me call a few people and see what can be done. Where are you?"

"About to park in your backyard."

Arif came out to meet Sikander. The two hugged briefly. "Hm. Good taste in automobiles," muttered Arif, looking over Sikander's shiny black Pajero, before they both stepped indoors.

"Let's make the calls," Sikander prodded.

As they entered the living room, the phone rang.

"Hello?" inquired Arif.

"Arif? Arif, is that you?" came the voice over the line.

"Yes, this is Arif. Who's this?"

"Aaaarif!" exclaimed the voice. "It's me! Junaid! I have to see you." Junaid sounded agitated.

"Junaid! [Assalaamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatullahi wa-barakaatuhu!](#) It's funny you should say that because guess who's here with me?" He looked at Sikander.

"Arif, I've no time for guessing games. We need to talk. We're getting all kinds of conflicting messages about us and the [Taliban](#) and I have a mission to plan with you."

"Oddly enough, I have Sikander sitting across the room from me and he believes he has a mission to plan, too. You'd better get over here."

"On my way."

Twenty minutes later Junaid was at Arif's door and the three of them proceeded into his basement. The old map of Nangarhar, now riddled with pencil marks, names, and other tidbits of information scribbled over it, along with no small number of stains, was spread out over the table. Junaid described his mission.

"We have hundreds of our people on the ground over there, [ISI](#), military advisers and the like. Until the attacks in New York, these people were arming, equipping, and instructing the [Taliban](#) how to defeat the Northern Alliance. Since Musharraf switched sides a little over two weeks ago, we've had to play it very carefully. Now we're helping the Northern Alliance kill the same people who were our friends last month and those of our men still attached to the [Taliban](#) have to be withdrawn to safety. Things are still uncertain but the [Taliban](#) aren't turning on them in case they can still preserve some sort of relationship with our government."

Arif thought for a moment, somberly taking in Junaid's mission. His eyes turned to meet Sikander's and seeing the young man's anxious mood, he launched into his old friend. "Junaid, Sikander needs to bring back Abdul Latif and his family. Whatever it is you're planning we can't ignore Abdul Latif. This time it's about rescuing our friends. We have to get them out of Afghanistan."

"Arif [bhai](#), I...yes, we do have to do that, but..." Junaid paused, deep in thought for a moment before resuming. "Hmm... You know, I think we may be able to work something out."

"What?" asked Sikander.

"Well, we're trying to get out as many of our officers and their [Taliban](#) contact people as we can. Musharraf is negotiating with the Americans. He's in direct contact with Cheney's office, and I'm sure he's made it clear if he let's his people get killed in Afghanistan or abandons them there, the Pakistan Army will give him a hard time. Pakistan will descend into an unholy mess, which even Cheney can see is not what anyone wants right now."

"How are you getting them out?" asked Sikander.

"With the Americans behind the Northern Alliance, the game will be over in—six?—ten weeks at most? Before the dust settles, we're looking to secure a spot where we can assemble our people and airlift them in Six Squadron's C130s. That'll require the Americans and the Northern Alliance to refrain from firing on people coming to the assembly point. They'll also have to create a safe air corridor for a few days or nights until our airlift is done. Since he's allowing our soldiers' [Taliban](#) handlers to come along, Musharraf is willing to let others slip on board too, if they can make it there in time. Sikander, I can get you at least part way into Afghanistan when my team goes in and if you can get Abdul Latif and his family to the assembly point in time, we should be able to get you all out."

"The Americans and Northern Alliance will just hold back from firing on their [Taliban](#) enemies? Doesn't seem likely," responded Sikander. "And what about the airlift itself? Won't the PAF planes risk getting shot down?"

"Look, it might annoy the troops on the ground, but the American leadership can see it makes sense to the overall strategy. I'm confident they'll be able to secure a safe air corridor once an in-country air base can be established.

"A location's already been selected?" queried Arif.

Junaid nodded. "Qunduz. The Americans think they'll have control of Mazar-e-Sharif pretty soon. The locals there are anti-[Taliban](#) anyway so an attack will have lots of ground support. That'll give them an airfield and from there, they'll be able to secure the airspace from Qunduz airport all the way to the Pak border."

"When does all this happen?" Sikander asked anxiously. "It'll take days to get everyone to Qunduz, especially with air attacks going on all around."

“Sometime in mid to late November. We’re working logistics right now.”

“Junaid [bhaj](#), that means you must have some idea when you’re getting your people into Afghanistan and how. You said I could join the mission team. When? How do we get across?”

“My friend, that’s why I needed to speak to Arif.”

Arif was deep in thought, already contemplating what would have to be arranged and who would have to be contacted. “We can probably get trucks straight up the pass to the border,” he said. “I can arrange them together with the mules that you’ll need to go further into the country but that’s about it.”

“We’ll have to split into small teams to reach the pickup locations from which to take them up to Qunduz,” added Junaid.

“Junaid, you make it sound like you’re joining us. You’ve never gone across before, why now?” Sikander asked.

Junaid looked down before responding with a sigh. “Iqbal, my son. He’s um, he’s with the [Taliban](#).” Returning his gaze to Sikander, Junaid shrugged resignedly. “Oh, I was all in favor of him going at first. Learning about [Islam](#) from them, you know? Huh! He’d been really into the American thing—jeans, T-shirts, and baseball caps—and it warmed my heart that he finally got interested in his religion. But then he started to write things to me about beards and [hijabs](#) and [jihads](#). It seemed the man writing me wasn’t Iqbal anymore.” Junaid’s voice quivered. “He’s been there for four years and, well, now he’s in trouble. I can’t leave his rescue to others.”

Sikander was tempted to ask if Iqbal wanted to be rescued, but he let the matter go. He had to focus on his own preparations. “When do we need to regroup?” he asked.

“October 26. That’s two-and-a-half weeks from now and a few days before the full moon, so we should have plenty of nighttime light,” replied Junaid.

“Let’s meet here at 1900 hours then,” Arif affirmed as the other two nodded, and the three of them parted, each lost in his own brewing anxiety.

Sikander returned to his office. It was on his way home anyway and he needed to let Jamil know of his expecting to be away for maybe a month or more from the end of October. In the time available, they would work together to prepare for Sikander’s absence. He revealed only that he had to travel to Afghanistan, with the [ISI](#), to bring his in-laws safely into Pakistan, saying nothing of the airlift mission or any other operational detail. Although apprehensive about Sikander’s absence, Jamil knew it wouldn’t be worth trying to dissuade his brother, given Rabia’s family situation.

When Sikander finally reached home in the late afternoon, Atiya was there with Qayyum.

“Where’s Rabia?” he asked.

“[Khan sahib](#), she went to pick up Ayub from school and should be back very soon.” Atiya returned her attention to Qayyum. She had laid out some children’s English elementary reading books with which Qayyum could entertain himself. Sikander slumped into the sofa and watched his young son playfully turning over the thick glossy cardboard pages and making simple sounds while looking at the pictures.

Crazy! Sikander thought. *The world’s gone crazy!* His gaze fixed on Qayyum, oblivious of all the madness into which the world had plunged itself. Qayyum’s world was simple. It was beautiful. The people who’d created the book he was thumbing through were happy people. They were Americans, too. How could things have unraveled to the point of their becoming indiscriminate targets for nineteen Saudi fanatics who believed that heaven lay on the other side of their acts? How could such Americans have decided that an entire population, already hard-pressed to eke out even a meager existence, should bear the consequences of the acts of a few criminals, simply because their government refused to turn them over without presentation of evidence? He had always loved America but hated what she was now doing to him, his family, and his adopted country. With that thought and not enough sleep over the last few nights, he dozed off.

“Sikander? Sikander, wake up,” came Sofie’s voice. Sikander stirred.

“Hm? Oh...” he murmured. “What...time is it?”

“It’s six in the evening, Sikander. You fell asleep. It’s time to eat.”

Sikander positioned himself upright as the fog cleared. “[Ammee-jan](#), I can’t eat right now. Tell Sarwat to heat up the food later. Where’s Rabia?”

“She came home with Ayub. She’s asleep too, in the bedroom. I asked Atiya to take Ayub and Qayyum away so you wouldn’t be disturbed, [bettha](#).” Sofie’s soothing motherly tones retreated with her into the kitchen.

Sikander yawned, massaging his head vigorously before going to his bedroom to waken Rabia. She had to be told about his plans without delay.

“Rabia? Wake up.” He prodded her. Slowly she stirred before asking about the time, and finally sat upright on the edge of the bed.

“We’re going to do it, Rabia.” Sikander declared. “We can get your family out.”

“You can? When? How?” asked Rabia, her depression and lack of sleep were apparent.

“It involves me going to Afghanistan soon,” he explained. “But I’ll probably need to be away for a few weeks.”

Rabia became immediately alert. “*That* long? Why?”

“I can’t explain it all, Rabia, but like I promised, I’ll not be going in alone and the operation *is* being planned carefully.”

Rabia frowned anxiously and with a hint of suspicion.

Sikander projected the most convincing smile he could. She returned a forbearing look. Deep down, Rabia wanted desperately to believe that a plan based on the assistance that Sikander had previously discussed might work. But she knew her husband well enough to know that he wouldn’t try to deceive her. If he was going, it meant he’d obtained the help he needed.

“I suppose I’ll just have to trust you, won’t I?”

Optimism began to regain its familiar grip on her and with it came the urge to give Sikander a warm, loving embrace. They had dinner and retired to bed, deliberately avoiding TV that night. Lying in the darkness with just a nightstand light to illuminate them, Sikander felt a tenderness from Rabia that he’d been missing for several days, as the tension leading up to this war had taken its toll.

His wife had reclaimed herself. Gazing upon her face in the low light, Sikander was once again smitten by her. Each of them had slept for a couple of hours already, and with a profusion of pheromones accumulating in the room, they were in no mood to sleep.

On October 20, Sikander and Junaid met in the [Jumma Bazaar](#). Junaid handed him a specially prepared map with an accurate representation not only of roads and waterways, but more importantly, of the topography. It would be valuable for any mule-bound journey from Torkhum to Laghar Juy but indispensable for traveling from there to Qunduz. He studied it intently, figuring out options until he felt he had a thorough grasp of it.

The agreed date finally arrived. Sikander gathered up some cash, put a few simple belongings together, including the map, and hugged his family passionately, especially Rabia, before driving himself to Arif’s place. He parked alongside two large troop trucks.

Junaid was already there with others Sikander had never met. On this particular mission, one of several taking place over the next few days, twelve

men were to start out, then split up into six teams of two with specific coordinates from which to draw escapee candidates. Those going out that evening were to go to Nangarhar, Lowgar, Wardak, Paktia, Ghazni, and Bamian provinces. Sikander would join the Nangarhar group to pursue his own objective in Laghar Juy.

The two trucks left that evening, reaching the border at eleven o'clock. Border security on the Afghan side was nonexistent, with communications down and nobody expecting any ground force invasion through the Khyber Pass.

At a small place outside Torkhum, a fellow [ISI](#) officer was waiting for them along with a couple of [Taliban](#) helpers. With them were forty-eight mules. Once the travelers disembarked, the truck drivers turned around and sped back to Landi Kotal. From this point the teams split up to proceed by mule to their designated locations. For Sikander, at least, it was not difficult, since they were already in Nangarhar. With him was an officer named Iftekhhar, who had been introduced to him in Jamrud as a lieutenant in the [ISI](#). Meanwhile, Junaid headed to Wardak, where he believed his son was located, and with him went another of the officers.

Iftekhhar bore a stiff demeanor, speaking curtly and to the point. "We need to get off the road tonight," he said. "We'll remain about ten kilometers to the south of the main road. My mission is to pick up our people at Shahi Kot and move them to Qunduz. Sikander, you will separate at Nadir Shah Kot, and take two mules with you to Laghar Juy. Try to gauge the situation, and if you feel you can come back this way or over the pass near Showlghar with your people, then do it. Otherwise, we'll meet in Qunduz. Bear in mind," he warned, "the Americans and Northern Alliance presence is going to increase sharply when they get a major air base. Once that happens, you can expect a lot of attention on the border regions with Pakistan. Any questions?"

Sikander was tired but he got the picture. *This Iftekhhar's a buttoned-down fellow*, he thought. *I wonder if he's had much experience on this side of the fence.*

The two needed to avoid making any more noise than necessary and planned to travel at least a hundred meters apart so as not to attract attention or be mistaken for [Taliban](#). The moon was bright, as predicted, so it wasn't hard to track Iftekhhar.

Occasionally, they heard jets flying overhead. Sometimes, Tomahawk cruise missiles raced across the countryside at barely a hundred meters off the ground, each relying on a triad of GPS, terrain contour-, and visual scene-matching to deliver destruction unerringly to its programmed destination. Error in selecting the destination was quite a different matter. American bombing campaigns were still focused on specific targets that would disable any [Taliban](#) ability to wage war or even mount a coordinated defense. Early warning radar installations, command and control facilities, airfields, and aircraft on the ground, were all targets.

At three in the morning they arrived in Ghani [Khel](#) and after connecting with Iftekhhar's contact there, they slept. Immediately after daybreak, the three of them left for Nadir Shah Kot, taking a local [Taliban](#) guide with them. Once there, they met up with two more [Taliban](#) and an [ISI](#) officer who together were to join Iftekhhar and lead him to his destination at Shahi Kot. It was time for Sikander to split from the group. Once again, Iftekhhar reminded him to be at Qunduz no later than November 17. Sikander took his two mules and bid the team [salaams](#) as he turned southwest, toward his old adopted haunt, a little more than thirty kilometers away.

That evening Sikander stopped at a house in a small village called Jabe, where he introduced himself as the young brother of Abdul Latif of Laghar Juy. He asked to be put up for the night under the protection of one of the villagers who was generous enough to offer an evening meal, a place to rest, and breakfast the following morning. Having thanked him for his hospitality, Sikander continued his trek.

Eventually, he arrived in Laghar Juy. It seemed deserted. *The men must be off in the fighting*, he thought. Leading his mules up to Abdul Latif's place, he called out: "Sister Razya?"

Razya recognized the voice immediately, and quickly emerged from the rear, where she had been preparing a small early evening meal. There was no [burkha](#); she simply pulled her [dupattha](#) over her head as she rushed to embrace him.

Without uttering a word, she cried softly and gestured for Sikander to lower his head to be blessed with a stroke of her hand.

"Sister Razya, where is everyone?"

She looked down.

"What?"

"[Ya Allah](#), Sikander...it's my [Khan](#). He's gone, [zwey](#)!"

"Gone? Where?" Sikander's expression paled as he saw Razya's face proclaim the needless nature of the question.

"We couldn't get word out to you. Sikander, Allah took him back almost two weeks ago," she stammered as she described the event that had turned her life on its head in the midst of the bombing and all the other evils of the time.

"Abdul Latif! *No!* [Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'un](#)!" cried Sikander. Despite all the turmoil, he had never imagined losing his old, indestructible friend. "What happened?" he asked, still unable to apprehend the loss.

"After the bombs started to fall again, his heart simply broke. He had seen so much fighting, so much killing. After the Russians left, he was sure that we would finally have peace. But now, with the family all split up and the attacks from America, he just didn't have the heart to continue living."

"So, you mean he just...died? Like, from what? Depression?"

"He was never the same after the boys joined up with the [Taliban](#). Their [Islam](#) was so alien to what he had always known," she explained, wiping her tear-stained cheek with her [dupattha](#) and regaining her composure. Sikander listened patiently. "He was praying [salaat-ul-fajr](#) and it must have been after the last [sajdah](#)..." she gazed into the distance and shook her head slowly. "Huh! Just stayed there, sitting in [tashahud](#) without moving! It was as if Allah had decided he should return to him from within the middle of prayer. Allah be praised and may he bless him. It took a while for me to... discover." Razya heaved a sigh. "Sikander, you should have seen the people who came to his funeral. Even eighty-year-old Yunus Khalis was there with Jalaluddin Haqqani and many others, but getting word back to Pakistan was—" unable to continue, her eyes closed tightly.

Sikander felt a counterintuitive and slightly embarrassing sense of joy coming over him as he processed the manner of Abdul Latif's passing in his own mind. It was anesthesia to his grief, providing something to hang on to. "That's...beautiful, Sister Razya! Abdul Latif had such a graceful departure from us all! It was a truly enviable death!" *Envable. Yes. That's what it was.* Sikander's heart fell once more as the tragedy reclaimed its grip. "Is he buried near here?"

"I believe so." With the hint of a shrug, Razya wiped her face again.

"You *believe* so?" Sikander asked, stunned by her answer.

"The [Taliban](#) don't let women come to graveyards."

Sikander permitted himself a moment of relish that the [Taliban](#) era might now be drawing to a close.

“Sister Razya, where’s Abdul Majeed?”

“He’s gone.”

“Where?” Sikander asked guardedly, and fearing the worst.

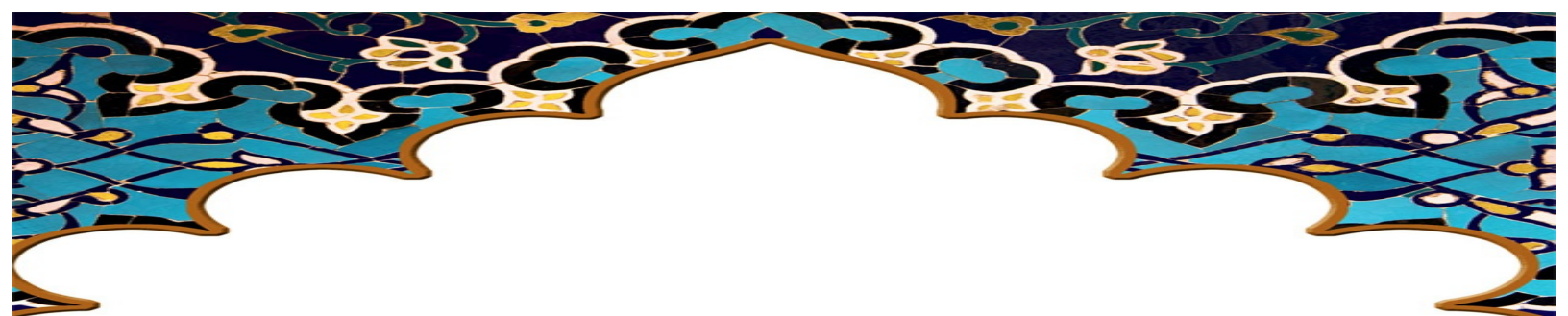
“He...they...they both went up into the mountains. They’ll almost certainly be in [Tora Bora](#) now, and...Allah protect themmm!” She wailed uncontrollably once again. “I’ve heard bombs being dropped up there. They’re loud. They’re *so* loud.” Razya wept as Sikander held her head against his bosom, comforting her as best he could. After letting her emotion drain, he asked about Noor, Fatima, and Amina. She replied that they were all safe and that Fatima and baby Latifa were in the back of the house. Amina was at home with Noor.

Sikander felt as if his weight had doubled as he walked to Noor’s house to meet his mother-in-law and Amina. They, too, were distraught over the absence of their men. Ejaz was safely in Pakistan but Saleem, Amina’s husband, was on the run in the mountains with Abdul Majeed. Sikander knew the location of [Tora Bora](#) and thought about whether it was worth trying to go up there to bring back the two cousins in time to depart for Pakistan. But first he needed to know where Abdul Latif had been buried.

Heading in the general direction of the village’s simple cemetery, he found a young man and asked him to show the way to Abdul Latif’s grave. The man began pointing when Sikander interrupted and asked him to lead him there. They walked about two hundred meters to the graveyard. It wasn’t hard to see the relatively fresh, unmarked rectangular mound of dirt.

Seeing it, Sikander paused in silent grief for a moment before raising his hands, palms upward, to offer the [Surat-ul-Fatiha](#). The young man joined him and the two of them said a few more silent prayers. When they were done, Sikander picked up a fistful of dirt and tossed it onto the mound.

As he stared blankly at the grave, tears welled up in his eyes. He saw not the mound but the grinning face of Abdul Latif [Khan](#) with his fiery [henna](#)-dyed beard, waking him up for the [fajr](#) prayer in the Zarghooni [Masjid](#). Through the tears, the image brought a wistful smile to his lips. It recalled ironic words that he silently mouthed; words he had often heard in the last few weeks. *Enduring Freedom*. As they reverberated in his mind, Razya’s description of his longtime friend’s blissful departure from this world returned to the forefront of his thoughts. Surely now, Abdul Latif was in a place where his freedom from all injustice and oppression, all want and need, *would* be enduring.



Chapter 14

Qanduz

THE NORTHERN ALLIANCE pursued its steady advance toward Mazar-e-Sharif. The initial pounding of [Taliban](#) targets elsewhere in Afghanistan was relentless and effective, and neither the [Taliban](#) nor the al-Qaeda Arabs knew what to do. Once the first wave of targeting whatever [Taliban](#) defense there may have been was complete, attention shifted to direct bombing attacks on those ground forces that had yet to surrender to the advancing Northern Alliance troops. At the start of November, the first phase of the American campaign was still in full swing, and targets of opportunity, especially supply trucks carrying oil and other important commodities into or around Afghanistan, were systematically attacked. Oil tanker trucks were frequently targeted by F/A-18 Super Hornets launched from the *Carl Vinson* and the *Enterprise*, but generally any form of vehicular traffic was highly likely to be hit.

Sikander spent a few days in Laghar Juy organizing the women for the upcoming trek, but before the journey could begin, he needed to seek out Abdul Majeed and Saleem, and persuade them to come with him to Pakistan. As he readied himself, Sikander asked Noor and Razya if they had more specific knowledge of where the men might be.

“They said they would be going toward Tangi Khola, right by the [Tora Bora](#) caves,” remarked Razya. “If you need to ask people while on the way, they may also refer to it as Karo [Khel](#).”

“I think I know where that is. Less than a day’s mule ride from here, isn’t it?” responded Sikander. Neither of the two women was able to answer but upon hearing the conversation Fatima hastily put on her [burkha](#) and came out of Razya’s house.

“Brother Sikander, stay close to the mountains and head west to Ghoshtara. From there you can pick up a dirt trail, which will continue in the same general direction and take you through Harun Baba all the way to Payenda [Khel](#). At that point you’ll need to leave the trail. It will turn north, but you will keep going west to cut across to Tangi Khola. That will put you right at the base of the mountains. A little higher up are the caves. There’s a clear path up to them and I’m sure you’ll find plenty of [Taliban](#) to help you.”

“[JazaakAllah](#), Sister Fatima,” Sikander offered his thanks politely.

Fatima wished him “[Khuda Hafiz](#).”

Atop a mule and with the other one trailing him, Sikander left the village, proceeding as Fatima had directed and in less than two hours he was already leaving the trail at Payenda [Khel](#). Throughout the journey he heard rumblings of distant explosions, while etched in the cloudless sky were vapor trails running southwest to northeast and then arcing back in graceful white loops or turning on to the northwest. *Heavenly signatures for earthly death warrants*, Sikander mused sadly.

The mountains echoed the sound of each bomb blast from as far away as Kabul and Jalalabad. Sikander had heard explosions during his [mujahideen](#) days, but the Americans were clearly using something quite different. Even his mule appeared to be spooked by the noises, which was rare, as these animals had spent much of their short lives surrounded by warfare. The sounds grew louder. Sikander decided to dismount and continue on foot for a while. He had not gone very far when he saw a band of black-turbaned individuals heading in his direction.

They appeared to be carrying [AK-47s](#) and [RPG](#) launchers. Being unarmed, he proceeded with caution, mentally rehearsing how he might negotiate with them to let him pass. They continued approaching, but as they did, it became clear that they were tired and dejected, doubtless having endured fighting or serious bombardment. Sikander judged that they would probably be too exhausted to accost him. The sense of diminishing threat eased his mind but then, an even more comforting sight greeted him.

“Ha! Abdul Majeed! Saleem!” Sikander exclaimed, mightily relieved to see the two men he was seeking walking among the band. Saleem raised his weapon in the air in a gesture of acknowledgment as a weary smile wrinkled his face.

“What are *you* doing here, brother?” he cried out as they continued toward each other. “You should be safely in Pakistan right now with your family.”

The rest of the troop moved on, oblivious to the encounter, as the three of them remained in place.

“I’m here to try to get you and your families out of Afghanistan.”

Abdul Majeed and Saleem exchanged glances. Despite his certainty that he had done the right thing to be part of the [Taliban](#), Saleem badly wanted to leave this earthly hell. He lowered his gaze, searching his soul for some meaning in all that had recently transpired. Abdul Majeed on the other hand was still coming to terms with his father’s death to give much thought to Sikander’s mission.

“You’ve heard that [Abaa](#) died?” he asked, dejected.

“Yes, I also heard how he died...and probably why. May Allah accept his soul in peace. I found a young man to show me his grave, and offered a [Fatiha](#). In fact, I just left Laghar Juy and was coming to [Tora Bora](#) to find the two of you.”

“You wouldn’t have found us there,” Abdul Majeed responded. “We’re on our way back from Jalalabad. We came toward these hills to get out of the open country up north.”

“What were you doing *there*?” Sikander asked, surprised and even more relieved that he had been lucky enough to intercept them here. Finding them in Jalalabad would have been impossible.

“The second day after Uncle was buried we went to [Tora Bora](#),” answered Saleem. “That’s where some of the early bombing had been. Then we heard that the Northern Alliance was trying to take Mazar-e-Sharif and we were on our way to help defend it. We stopped in Jalalabad with Sister Fatima’s family.”

“But while we were there, hell came to earth!” said Abdul Majeed. “Everywhere we looked it was raining bombs. They hit Majpoorbal village and the Sorkhrod [masjid](#). A couple of days later it was Jalalabad again. Three days after that, they were still coming. They hit Morgai and Gere [Khel](#), and on the eighteenth of October a missile just wiped out a family in a truck trying to flee Jalalabad.

“There’s been so much bombing, Sikander!” Abdul Majeed continued. “People, cars, trucks, buses on the road...all of them blown to pieces and with burned out bodies looking like charcoal in them! What’s going on? They want to catch some criminals, yet so many men, women, children, and animals have to die to let the Americans have their [badal](#)? Is that their idea of [badal](#)?”

“I know.” Sikander sighed. “It’s insane. Totally insane!” Staring skyward, he shook his head, frustrated with the world’s madness and his inability to affect it. “So, how did you end up here?” he asked.

“With that kind of bombardment there was little chance of progress north. We thought we’d return to our families and see if there was a way out of this hole.” Abdul Majeed explained, clearly ashamed of his sense of retreat. “When we met up with some others coming out of Kabul, we all decided to track back closer to the mountains. We just came through Tangi Khola about an hour ago. From a distance it seemed like there was no action this close to the [Spin Ghar](#), so we chose this way around.”

Absorbing the explanation, Sikander refocused on the matter at hand. “We have to get back to Laghar Juy and prepare to leave for Pakistan,” he

explained. With no one in disagreement the three of them trekked home, taking turns between riding the two mules and walking.

To the relief of the women, by nightfall, the men were back. It was the first night in three that the two cousins had slept in a bed. The following morning, November 4, after a meager breakfast everyone gathered cross-legged on Razya's [durree](#)-covered floor to hear what Sikander had to say.

"I'm here with the help of the [ISI](#)," he began. "Understand that officially, Pakistan has sided with America and you [Taliban](#) are now...Pakistan's enemy." Sikander paused to let the fact sink in.

"Huh! If I'd known that the whole country would be getting destroyed because we didn't let the Americans have Bin Laden, I would have sided against the [Taliban](#)," Noor proclaimed bitterly, glaring through her [burkha](#) at a sheepish Saleem. "You've brought nothing but hardship! Now this! And for what? Some mindless mullahs who convinced you of their crazed ideas!" She trembled tearfully.

Her angered comments prompted Sikander to ponder what he might have said and when he might have said it, to set his two good friends on a different path. But now was not the time for such reflections.

"What's your plan?" asked Saleem, anxious to change the subject.

"Well, I did say that this was the official position. But Musharraf has told the Americans that he can't just switch sides and abandon his men here without risking his own position with the Army. They've been persuaded and have cleared the way for an evacuation of our officers, our [ISI](#) people, and their [Taliban](#) contacts. Pakistan will be flying large transport aircraft into the country over a few nights from the fifteenth of this month onward. If we can make it to the airfield in time for the airlift, Junaid has assured me we'll be evacuated."

"Which airfield?" asked Abdul Majeed.

"That's the bad news. It's Qunduz," replied Sikander, lowering his gaze.

"Qun—Up *north*, you mean?" asked Saleem. Sikander gave a weak nod. "Why, that has to be at least two hundred and fifty, maybe three hundred kilometers!" continued Saleem. "We'd have to make thirty kilometers a day. For ten days straight."

"While bombs are raining on us," added Abdul Majeed, propping his elbows on his knees with his head in his hands.

Sikander turned toward the women, unable to see their expressions but aware of them staring at him intently. "There *is* another option," he offered cautiously. "It'll mean crossing the high passes into Pakistan as we've done in the past, but we'll require more mules than the two we have. The distance is a lot shorter and we could stop at Ejaz's on the way. We should get cell phone coverage once we're on the Pakistan side, and I could arrange to have Arif pick us up."

"There was bad weather two days ago," observed Razya dryly. "A few of the women were discussing it while you were gone yesterday and said that their men had been trying to get out that way but couldn't get through."

"If that's true and we try, but fail, we'll have to turn back and travel even farther from there than from here. Meanwhile we'll have wasted valuable time. I think we should discuss it and decide," said Sikander as he scanned the room.

He waited for an answer. Saleem finally broke the awkward silence. "We'll need more mules. For either choice, I mean. Do you know any more about the American bombing? Is it likely to remain over the big cities or are they going to block the mountains as well?"

"I don't know," Sikander answered, shrugging. "But if Sister Razya's right, I don't think we can risk the mountain route. I know Junaid's assurance about Qunduz is unlikely to be a lie or a mistake. After all, he helped me and several others get here. I recommend Qunduz."

"We could travel along the periphery of major roads, break up into two or three smaller groups about a hundred meters apart and take cover as needed. Their missiles will likely be programmed to attack major facilities, so we should keep as far from such places as possible. That would leave us exposed to their aircraft, which tend to be the ones going after small groups and convoys, but I think if we're not in vehicles it should help."

"What about Northern Alliance? How will we avoid them?" asked Abdul Majeed.

"As far as I recall, they're either in the Panjshir north of Kabul and being met by [Taliban](#) ground forces, or they'll be much farther north, going after Mazar-e-Sharif. It is a risk," admitted Sikander, "and if we come across them we could surrender to them, appealing to their being fellow Muslims. We certainly wouldn't want to risk our women and Latifa by engaging them with weapons."

"May I be allowed to speak?" Amina's voice emerged from behind her [burkha](#).

Sikander fixed his gaze on Saleem, "Sister Amina, we all need to be free to speak here. Please, go ahead," Sikander replied. Saleem didn't stir.

"I believe we should go with you to Qunduz and remember Allah. He will be the one to protect us and get us there, if we truly believe in his power. Our wits are to be used until we have exhausted them. If we get through, then it will be by his will. If not, then as long as we made our best effort, we must be at peace in the knowledge that all outcomes belong to Allah and the fates of all of us belong to him."

No one could disagree. Sikander looked at Saleem, whose eyes were closed as he took in his wife's words. He was consumed by guilt at having been a party, in whatever small way, to the tragedy now befalling all of humanity. What his wife had said, without openly insulting her husband, simply reminded them all that the [Taliban](#) calamity was itself a divinely ordained trial.

With everyone settled on the Qunduz route Sikander felt that a plan to get there could now be described.

"All right, we can't get there in time on foot. I agree with that. There are eight of us and if little Latifa can ride with one of the women, we'd need seven mules for riding. Allowing for another three for whatever light baggage we want to put on them, we could also rotate them with those we'd be riding on. That makes a total of ten. We have two so where can we get another eight?"

"A village not far from here...maybe fifteen kilometers, called Sharkanay, in the direction of Anarbagh, has a mule trader. Anyone in the village will direct you to him. A lot of people have been leaving the villages so there may be mules available." Saleem said.

"Fine," acknowledged Sikander. "Two of us should go with the mules we have. Abdul Majeed, can you come with me?"

"Let's go now so we can be back this evening," said Abdul Majeed as he arose. After the briefest of preparations, the two of them rode off. They made good time into Sharkanay, stopping en route for [zuhri](#), then sought out the man with the mules. He had six. Although Sikander had been wise enough to bring both Pakistani rupees and U.S. dollars, he chose to offer ten thousand rupees, imagining a likely resentment toward the American currency at this time. The mule trader gladly accepted and explained that they might find more mules in Kamkay [Kalay](#), which would not be a significant detour on their way back to Laghar Juy.

Trailing their newly acquired mules, Sikander and Abdul Majeed turned back for Laghar Juy, stopping in Kamkay to buy the last two. The seller wanted five thousand rupees for them, which, despite an argument from Abdul Majeed, Sikander was happy to pay. With the mules in tow, after a brief stop for [asr](#), they were back by sunset.

Luckily, given the scarcity of intact high-value targets for the Northern Alliance, the bombing in this area had recently dwindled. All air defense targets had been demolished and there was little point in continued attacks unless it was in tactical support of the Northern Alliance's ground forces. Even so, many air defense facilities had been so designated from information dating back to the Soviet era, but being typically located in populated areas

the buildings in which they had been installed had either been repurposed for civilian activities, or fallen into disuse. Due largely to the use of satellite imagery or aerial photography without adequate ground-based human intelligence, there seemed little distinction in bombing priority between non-functioning facilities in otherwise occupied buildings and functioning ones. The resulting collateral damage took many more civilians lives than acknowledged in any news briefings. Whatever the circumstances governing choices of targets, Sikander and Abdul Majeed were spared the need to dodge any bombs.

At twilight on November 5, the family was ready to start out. After [fajr](#), Sikander asked everyone to reconvene in Razya's home for breakfast and to discuss the route and other details. When breakfast was over, while everyone was still seated on the floor, Sikander reached into his [qamees's](#) deep side pocket to pull out the tightly folded map given to him by Junaid. He spread it out in the middle of the [durree](#).

"We should all understand how we're to get to Qunduz, but particularly Abdul Majeed and Saleem, in case anything should happen to either of you or me," explained Sikander.

"We'll go back the way we came the day before yesterday from [Tora Bora](#)." He glanced toward Saleem and Abdul Majeed. "Once we get to Tangi Khola, we'll head northwest toward Wazir and take the trail north from there to Zor Bazaar. We should eventually arrive at the bottom of the valley at Baghwanay. There, we turn west. Once we reach Ghare Kala we again go north to cut through a gap in the mountains. If we follow that trail for about nine kilometers, it will take us to the main Jalalabad-to-Kabul road."

Sikander paused for questions and comments. Abdul Majeed and Saleem were the critical ones and they seemed to be clear. It was territory they were familiar with.

"Where next?" Abdul Majeed asked.

"We should have an easier time of it along that road but we need to stay well to the north of it because vehicles on it will be targets. Heading west we leave the road at Sorubi, near the lake of the Naglu Dam. We take the lake's eastern shoreline and pick up the Nejrab River going north once again. That country is relatively easy going until we get just south of Nejrab village. That's where we climb into the mountains and descend into the Panjshir Valley. We follow the Panjshir River, until we're due north of Bagram, near Mahmud Raqi, right here," explained Sikander, pointing to the map. "From there we cross over to Charikar and pick up the northbound highway out of Kabul. That'll take us through more mountain passes to Pul-i-Khumri. As before, we'll stay at the riverbank level away from the road. From Pul-i-Khumri, where the road forks, we follow the eastern branch toward Baghlan, and from there to Qunduz."

"You seem to have this well covered, Sikander!" remarked Razya.

"This *was* the plan I entered the country with." Sikander replied.

"What about timing?" Abdul Majeed asked.

"Good question, brother. I think we can get to Baghwanay by the end of today?" Sikander looked for and received nods from around the room.

"Right. From there to the lake at Sorubi should take us to the end of tomorrow, November sixth. On the seventh, we need to get about two-thirds of the way along the Nejrab, so that by the end of the eighth we can be in the mountain pass on our way to Charikar. The ninth should see us in Charikar, and by the tenth, we should be as far as the Salang Tunnel en-route to Pul-i-Khumri. For the eleventh, we should be at about where the road takes a sharp turn to the west, right here," Sikander pointed, "and on the twelfth, I'd like us to be at Pul-i-Khumri. Allowing a couple of days from there, we should make Qunduz by the fourteenth.

"The airfield is to the south of the city on the east side of the main highway, so we won't need to go as far as the city itself. If we're lucky, Junaid will be there to confirm our legitimacy, but in any case, he gave me documents to use if need be."

It remained to be seen if Sikander's impressive grasp of Afghanistan's geography extended to understanding the real terrain and whether or not he had described realistic goals. He planned on between twenty-five and thirty kilometers each day, which seemed a feasible distance if the animals could be rotated appropriately and were kept well watered and fed. Indeed, the plan's maximum use of river valleys and the green zones surrounding them would afford some level of protection as well as fodder for the mules.

With these matters understood and gone over several times with Abdul Majeed and Saleem, the group set off from Laghar Juy. For Abdul Majeed and Razya's benefit, and with Razya's insistence that there would be no wailing or moaning, the family stopped once again to offer the [Fatiha](#) over Abdul Latif's grave. Saleem and Abdul Majeed were too weary to oppose the women's presence there.

With the grave solemnly visited, their departure from Laghar Juy began in earnest. Sikander asked Abdul Majeed to take the lead with Razya and Noor behind him. Fatima came next, then Saleem and Amina. He planned to float from the front to the back and signal as needed to indicate if it was safe to keep moving. Razya and Noor wept softly inside their [burkhas](#) as they occasionally stole a glance back upon the village, ironically a haven in war and a place of family strife in such peace as Afghanistan had seen since the Soviet departure. A palpable sense of sundering tore at them. Everything that had defined who they had been until now—their memories, hopes, dreams, even their fears—all of it was being abandoned.

[Khan](#). *My love. Stand watch over it! Stand watch as you did so well in life. We're leaving, but you know that Laghar Juy will forever be yours. Yours until [Qiyaamah](#)!* Razya prayed as her tearful ride took her out of sight of the village for the last time.

Apart from the rumbling thunder of the bombs in the distance, the going was quiet. They easily reached Baghwanay in eight-and-a-half hours, taking frequent rests by the side of numerous streams. It didn't take long to find an abandoned home in which to spend the night. Better still, they were able to scavenge a little food and even a box of matches.

Early the next morning the group entered the narrow pass that would lead them north to the Jalalabad-to-Kabul road. As they neared the road in the afternoon, the bomb craters and debris were so numerous that they had to weave around them. Wreckage was strewn along the road into the distance in both directions. An occasional jet could be heard screaming overhead, prompting them instinctively to take whatever cover they could.

In an odd way, however, being openly visible and not in vehicles made them less likely targets. The bright blue shuttlecock [burkhas](#) worn by the women vividly telegraphed to pilots that theirs was a non-combatant family group, and no threat to anyone.

By evening on the second day they left the main highway to go north into Sorubi, where they rested. On the third day, they headed up the Nejrab river valley, remaining close to the water's edge and venturing toward the road only if an impassable obstacle made it worth the risk. Progress was again good as the bombing had either subsided or was too far away to be heard. Either way, the hideous sounds had become inaudible, and with the noise not dominating anyone's consciousness, they found the opportunity to chat. On one such occasion, with Saleem out in front, Sikander decided to ride between Noor and Razya. Noor spoke first.

"Sikander, I haven't thanked you for thinking of us. [JazaakAllah](#)."

"[Adey](#)," he responded. "How could it be otherwise? Rabia and I, we miss you and the family."

"Yes, I suppose that must be true. But don't you blame us for not accepting your offer to come and stay in Pakistan?" she probed.

“Not at all, [Adey](#)! Who could possibly have known that things would come to this? The very people who helped us rid the country of Russians, then abandoned us, now...” Sikander had to pause as a Super Hornet screamed up the valley, “...attack us,” he said, craning his neck skyward to follow it flying off to the north.

“How are Ayub and Qayyum?” asked Noor, defiantly preferring to ignore the jet. She was tired of having her reactions dominated by events and was determined to behave the way she wanted.

“[Adey](#), if you could see them now!” Sikander explained, feeling the void of being without them. “Ayub is going to a great school and doing very well. He’s definitely Rabia’s offspring, if you understand my meaning.”

Noor and Sikander chuckled. “Qayyum has Atiya, his Afghan nanny, to look after him and he’s just started to look at picture books.”

Noor could see the love for his family that flowed from Sikander. It made her reflect that her own love for Saleem could not be diminished despite her strong disapproval of his ways as a member of the [Taliban](#).

By the end of November 7, the group was near the northernmost end of the Nejrab Valley, just south of the village that shared its name with the river.

Latifa was a remarkably easy child to bring along and didn’t do much complaining aside from being scared by low flying aircraft, as they often came up the valley. The night was cold and even though they took shelter in a natural bluff against the wind coming down the valley, they needed a fire and their blankets.

The sun came over the crest of the far side of the river valley the following morning. Once it cleared the ridgeline it warmed the air enough to motivate everyone to ready themselves for the day’s trek. The group hadn’t been going for very long when they came upon the expected trail rising up away from the Nejrab and into the hills to their west. It was to lead them into the Panjshir Valley and thence to Charikar. It began with a narrow ravine, about four kilometers long and at the far end, past a saddle in the hills, was the Panjshir River, which coursed westward ahead of them. The climb was fairly steep to begin with but became quite passable after about half a kilometer, and although a few switchbacks had to be taken, they were soon up on the high ground and gazing back for the last time upon the beautiful green valley of the Nejrab. Meandering serenely, its waters stood in stark contrast to the turbulent time and space through which they flowed.

Sikander was out in the lead by about half a kilometer. Abdul Majeed talked with Fatima while Razya held Latifa on her lap. As the terrain became rougher, there was considerably more jostling than previously. Latifa giggled every time she and Razya bounced together on the back of the mule. Unable to do otherwise, Razya laughed along with her and the amusement didn’t take long to infect the rest of the group.

“Do you see how happy she is at these saddest of times, Abdul Majeed?” asked Fatima.

“Of course I do,” replied her husband, picking up on the wistfulness of Fatima’s comment.

“Do you think if she knew what life will be like for her she would want to continue?” asked Fatima.

“How do you mean?” Abdul Majeed asked sharply.

“Well, let me see. She’ll get to the age of eight and then you will bring her out of all meaningful contact with anyone and she will be kept at home without any schooling. Am I right?”

“Yes...and...no,” replied Abdul Majeed. “Islam prohibits women from traveling unaccompa—”

“No,” interrupted Fatima. “The principle is that women mustn’t travel unaccompanied for journeys lasting more than a certain time—and by tradition, it’s the distance covered in three days and three nights. An idiot can see that this would hardly be the case for going to and from school, so there was never a need to restrict girls in this way, was there?”

“But the [ulema](#) say that the rulings are for any amount of time,” Abdul Majeed offered meekly.

“Not all or even most [ulema](#) have come to that destructive conclusion, Abdul Majeed,” Fatima persisted. “And that misunderstanding will cost our people dearly when this generation of girls grows up. They’ll be women with no idea how to convey any wisdom or knowledge to their children.” Fatima struck her final jab. “And that’s our ideal outcome for Latifa is it?”

“But Mullah Omar said—”

“Please,” retorted Fatima impatiently. “He himself denies being a mullah. He’s even acknowledged that he didn’t finish his own schooling at the [madrassah](#). It’s why you call yourselves the [Taliban](#), after all.”

Abdul Majeed fell silent. He would sooner have faced a Russian helicopter.

By nightfall, the travelers reached a point about ten kilometers north of the sprawling Bagram air base. They had left the Panjshir Valley and were thankful for having avoided Northern Alliance troops.

As November 9 emerged out of the night and dawn spread its familiar crack in the blackness, the group arose and performed the [fajr](#) prayer before resuming the trek. Sikander was out in the lead when in the distance to the southwest, he saw a pillar of dense smoke painted against the gradually brightening sky. The windless dawn air let it stand vertical and undisturbed—a thick, black exclamation mark, eloquently punctuating the collective scream of a war-ravaged landscape. Its dot was a bombed out oil truck, still burning from the previous evening.

Sikander made a spirited effort to resist the urge to process the bomb’s tragedy in human terms. He tried imagining a driverless gasoline truck winding its way to Bagram and being taken out. He failed. Surreally, Sikander began dissecting the moment of the explosion and how the wave of pressure must have buckled the metal of the truck. He imagined the final moment of consciousness of the driver and the one before that. And the one after. He imagined how the driver’s vaporization would have allowed him neither awareness nor preparation for his imminent oblivion. One moment he existed. The next, he didn’t. By that grotesque measure, the driver might even have been considered “lucky.”

Before the image could settle too deeply into Sikander’s mind, they were on the move again. Abdul Majeed took point duty. Sikander took up position between the two matriarchs, and Saleem kept Amina and Fatima company. The thunderclap explosions resumed, providing fresh impetus for the group to keep moving so that the sound might weaken and hopefully disappear altogether. But as long as they were traveling west toward the main highway, Kabul would continue to dog them with its rumblings from a roughly constant forty kilometers away.

To keep his companions distracted from the sounds of the bombing, Sikander talked to them about life back home in Peshawar. He liked to describe his parents and especially how much he’d learned from his father after returning from Afghanistan. Noor seemed particularly interested in Sikander’s descriptions of his business. Naturally concerned for her daughter’s financial security, she eventually succumbed to her curiosity.

“How much money do you make in a month, Sikander?”

In upper-middle-class Pakistani society, patterned in many respects on Western cultural norms, this was not a common question and would certainly have seemed rude. Yet for more down-to-earth people it was not intended to be jarring or insulting and was considered in some ways about as polite as asking after one’s health.

“[Adey](#), I suppose I could never say I make enough,” replied Sikander, chuckling and hoping to deflect the earnestness of the question with his

plainly unskilled humor.

Noor persisted, puzzled by Sikander's evasiveness. When he relented and revealed his income, she became pleased and silent. Sikander couldn't observe the former but the silence drew him to respond.

"Adey, did I describe too small a sum?"

"Ha!" Noor erupted in a laugh, something Sikander hadn't witnessed in a long time. "I'm sure it's enough! Quite sure!"

He went on to describe his brother and sister and the house where they lived, and with Noor's constant probing, the origin of Rabia's curiosity was plain to see.

As they approached Charikar, the highway out of Kabul was almost upon them. In the distance ahead and from their elevated vantage point, it could easily be seen running from left to right. Behind it, to the west, lay another range of mountains, abruptly putting a stop to the gently sloping plain on which they had been traveling. To their right, their northbound direction for the following day appeared equally imposing, as there, too, the land rose sharply, creating a seemingly impassable north wall. By afternoon, they reached the highway. Evidence of recent military activity was visible as more burned-out vehicles dotted the length of the road. Their number bore compelling testimony to the killing that had occurred barely a month into this war.

"Behind those mountains is Qunduz," Sikander announced, pointing to the north. "Soon we'll have completed half the journey, [alhamdulillah](#), but now it's time to stop for this evening and maybe pick up some lamb [kebabs](#) from a local seller."

The road seemed important enough for more than one enterprising street peddler to try his luck with the elevated pedestrian traffic, but well away from the road itself. The group lost no opportunity to stock up whenever they came across a [kebab](#), fruit, or vegetable stall.

The following morning, they turned north, tracking parallel to the highway out of Kabul. Remaining at least half a kilometer to the east or west of the road, they rarely saw any vehicles on the once busy national artery. The bombs over Kabul were relentless, but thankfully, their noise finally abated as Kabul receded steadily behind them. Their luck held up and they made it, tired but unscathed, as far as the Salang Tunnel by day's end.

The trip beyond that point, despite the challenging terrain, remained relatively uneventful until on November 12 they approached Pul-i-Khumri, a modest-sized town along the main road to Qunduz, and the capital of Baghlan Province.

There was a problem, however. This was Tadjik country and they could no longer assume they would be safe. The Tadjiks were the enemies of the predominantly [Pashtun Taliban](#), and while the territory was still nominally under [Taliban](#) control, hostility simmered beneath the surface. Although [Pashto](#) was spoken, the common language was Dari, which none of the travelers spoke. The men discussed options for slipping through the town. A group of three men, four women, two of whom were older, and a baby, could hardly appear less hostile. The challenge would be to recognize and avoid forces of the Northern Alliance and not to get captured or killed simply for being [Pashtuns](#).

"Put away the black turbans, brothers," said Sikander. "I can wear my [pakol](#), but I only have mine. We should get more for the two of you. I think we could all use some [chadors](#) as well. It's getting cold up here even in the day time."

Sikander paused for a moment before confronting what would no doubt be a delicate issue. "Brothers, the women should remove their [burkhas](#) and cover their heads with [dupatthas](#). But they can keep them hanging well over their faces."

Abdul Majeed and Saleem silently exchanged glances, before turning to face Sikander. Saleem's grudging nod of agreement was barely perceptible and Abdul Majeed sat motionless. Sikander didn't try to confirm the sale, choosing instead to act presumptively. Standing on principle on matters of dress and headgear would be pointless. Their lives might depend on it, and even the [Taliban](#) were comfortable with the widely held position in [Islam](#) that behavioral prohibitions were suspended to the extent necessary for survival. The reality of any such threat was for the conscience to decide on each occasion.

But even as they were preparing to find Tadjik control of Pul-i-Khumri, a parallel concern was that the town might still be under the [Taliban](#). Having adopted the garb of the Tadjiks, the last thing they needed was a [Taliban](#) religious policeman challenging the women for dressing improperly.

"Let me handle it if that happens, Sikander," offered Abdul Majeed. "I'll tell him our situation and he should be sympathetic."

"I don't think we'll have that kind of problem, Brother," Saleem added. "The [Taliban](#) are too busy focusing on Mazar-e-Sharif right now, and the Tadjiks are pretty easy-going on their women. Remember Ayesha Bibi? She was a [mujahideen](#) commander from around here. She led about a hundred men fighting the Russians, as far as I recall."

Abdul Majeed shrugged.

Sikander explained his plan. "Let me go ahead while you all remain here. I'll buy what we need, see who's running things in Pul-i-Khumri, and maybe we'll be able to make sense of how to get past this town." Everyone agreed.

While Sikander rode into Pul-i-Khumri to look for [pakols](#) and [chadors](#), the rest of them took a much-needed break sitting by the river. Late that afternoon, to their relief, Sikander could be seen approaching. Along with the reins to his mule, he was clutching three plastic bags and upon reaching them, after lobbing, Frisbee-style, a [pakol](#) to each of his male companions, he distributed [chadors](#) to everyone.

"Judging by the way the women were dressed and walking about, it looks as if the [Taliban](#) have pulled out," Sikander remarked. He turned to Abdul Majeed and Saleem. "It also means that we risk our bushy beards attracting attention. I suggest when we wear these [chadors](#) we should cover our chins too."

The women discreetly removed their [burkhas](#) and drew their [dupatthas](#) over their heads, before wrapping in their [chadors](#).

Sikander had never seen the faces of either Fatima or Amina, and in an awkward but instinctive fashion, he smiled at the women before casting his gaze elsewhere. He had known Fatima since their first encounter a few years earlier and had come to know Amina on this trip. Now it felt as if he was meeting them for the very first time. Abdul Majeed wasn't looking, but Saleem was. He was clear about the reason for the change of attire but was unhappy with it. He didn't press the issue, however, choosing instead to learn more from Sikander about the situation in Pul-i-Khumri.

"How is it in the city?"

"The people seem relaxed. I didn't get any trouble buying the [pakols](#) and [chadors](#). How it will be when we get farther north, I don't know."

Sikander finally picked up the third bag. "This place also has pretty good fruit and vegetables," he said, grinning.

They performed the [asr](#) prayer and resumed their onward progress. It soon became dusk and after another pause for [maghrib](#), they decided that reaching the north side of the town was probably wise, so they continued to move in the darkness. At least it would provide some cover against suspicious eyes. After emerging from the canyons on the north side of Pul-i-Khumri, they settled down for the night among a secluded cluster of trees in an open field between the Qunduz River and the main road from Kabul.

A refreshing and remarkably quiet night out in the open was followed by the first light of dawn striking the faces of the mountains ahead and to the west. They became bright-red beacons while the valley floor was still in darkness. These mountains formed the walls of the last of the Qunduz River's canyons through which the group would have to pass. After the dawn prayer, and a breakfast of the dried fruit Sikander had brought them, they began the

next day of their long journey.

With the going relatively easy, the travelers soon passed through Baghlan before reaching Char Shamba Tipa, a tiny tribal village just south of the entrance to the last of the canyons. On approaching the settlement, they came across a sight they hadn't seen thus far.

Streaming from west to east across the landscape in the distance ahead of Sikander and his fellow travelers were several hundred men. They seemed to be approaching the same canyon toward which Sikander's group was headed.

"Escaping [Taliban](#), I bet," Sikander observed. "They don't look like they're gearing up for a fight. I can see some of them limping."

"Yes," said Abdul Majeed. "Strange though, how they don't seem afraid of being attacked."

"Well, it's possible our [ISI](#) and their [Taliban](#) contacts are among them but whoever they are, we should approach them with caution," replied Sikander.

Amina chimed in. "I suggest we dress in a manner more appropriate to these people," as she hurriedly donned her [burkha](#). The other women followed suit.

Abdul Majeed and Saleem put on their turbans, wrapping the cloth around the [pakols](#). Sikander remained the way he was.

As they neared the steady stream of foot soldiers it became clear that the men were [Taliban](#). Abdul Majeed decided to engage some of them in conversation. It would establish his own [Taliban](#) credentials and allow him to learn of their situation. Seeking out a weary looking group of three, he dismounted to greet them.

"[Assalaamu 'alaykum](#), brothers. Where are you coming from?"

"[Wa 'alaykum assalaam](#). Mazar-e-Sharif," replied one of them.

"What happened? Why are so many going to Qunduz?"

"We lost Mazar-e-Sharif to Dostum and Atta Mohammed Noor's people. They rushed the [Imam](#) Bukhri Bridge, taking the military base and the airport. After that, a larger force attacked us including some Americans. Retreat was our only option. As far as we know, we still have Qunduz, so that's where we're headed to regroup," he said. "If we have to die there then so be it. Until then, we'll fight those Tadjik [haraamzadas](#) that sold their souls to the Americans!"

Abdul Majeed rode back to the group and let them know what he'd learned.

"We should mingle with them," Sikander suggested, "at least until we make the airfield. It's about fifteen kilometers from the far side of this canyon."

Moving along a little faster than walking pace, by the time they were out of the canyon they were close to the front of the throng. The escaping [Taliban](#) weren't in a mood for conversation. Some were anxious about being trapped in the canyon and ambushed there. Others worried about Qunduz being the place where they would end their lives. Yet others no doubt imagined their salvation lay at the end of this walk if they were, for example, among the [ISI](#) or their sponsored [Taliban](#). In any case, they had no inclination to chitchat with the group from Laghar Juy. As night fell, some of the men decided to keep walking while others opted to bed down. The canyon walls progressively spread apart, widening the floor into a flatter valley as the Qunduz River made a large S-bend before resuming its northerly track toward Qunduz. As the previously gusty wind eased a little, Sikander's group found a natural low mound that offered some protection on the downwind side, where the group rested for the night. They were within fifteen kilometers of the airfield.

Morning broke once again. After [fajr](#), everyone collected their things to load on the mules. As they were busy with this task, a voice called out Sikander's name. He looked around but with people and faces everywhere he was unable to place the sound.

"Sikander!" called the voice again. This time, Sikander's searching eyes plucked the caller from the throng. It was Junaid and with him was a young man, obviously his son.

"Junaid! You old tiger! [Assalaamu 'alaykum](#)!" exclaimed Sikander as the two moved closer to hug and greet each other. Abdul Majeed and Saleem hurried toward them. Junaid introduced Iqbal. When the introductions were over, Junaid looked around increasingly puzzled. "Abdul Latif?" he asked.

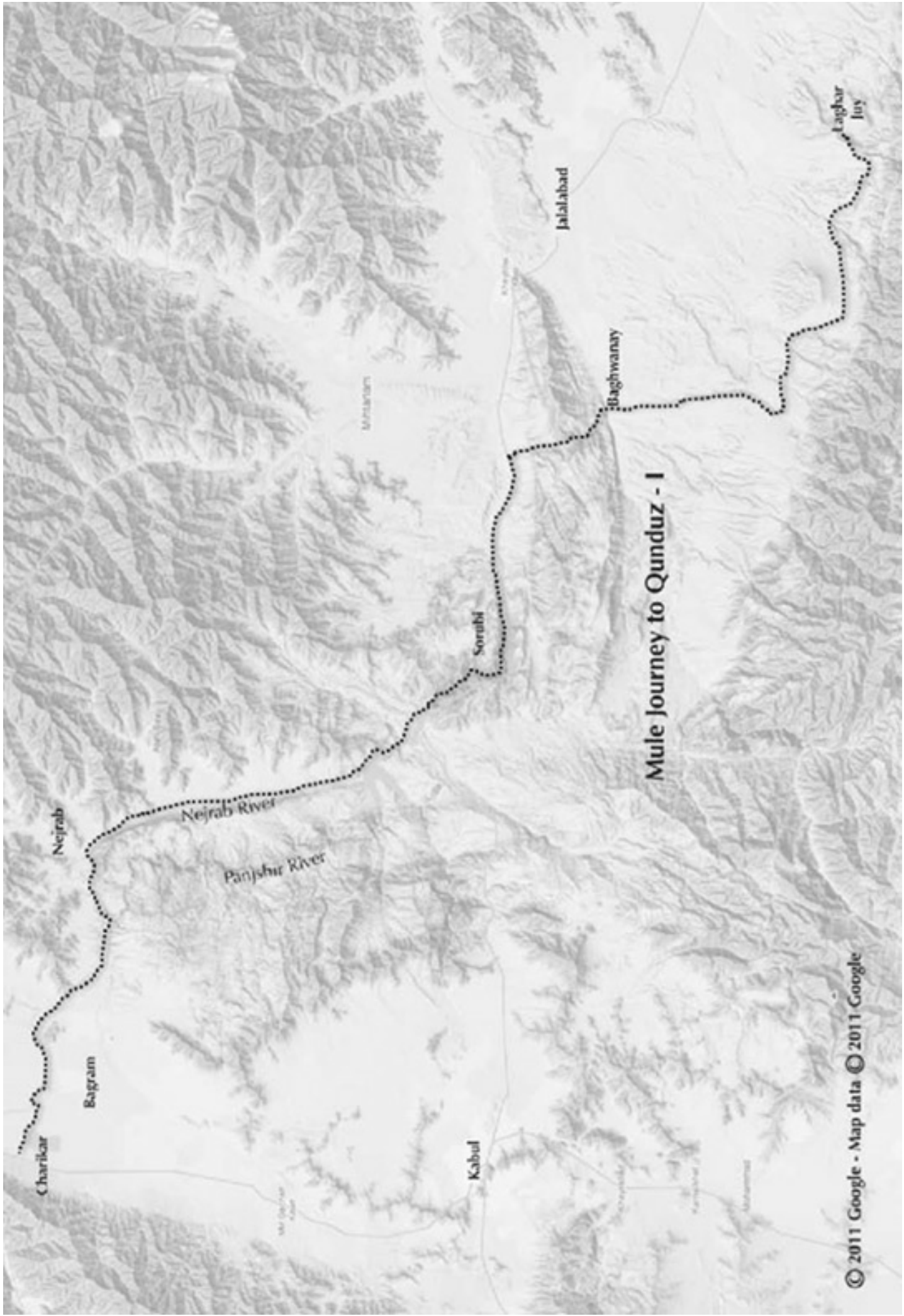
Sikander exchanged glances with Abdul Majeed, before turning to Junaid. "He uh, Junaid, he passed away about a month ago," Sikander uttered. Junaid's eyes widened in shock then darted to Abdul Majeed. "Ohhh... [Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'un](#). Abdul Majeed, I am so sorry to hear that! He was a kindhearted man whose concern was for his people!" Still shaken by the news, Junaid asked: "Your mother; where is she?"

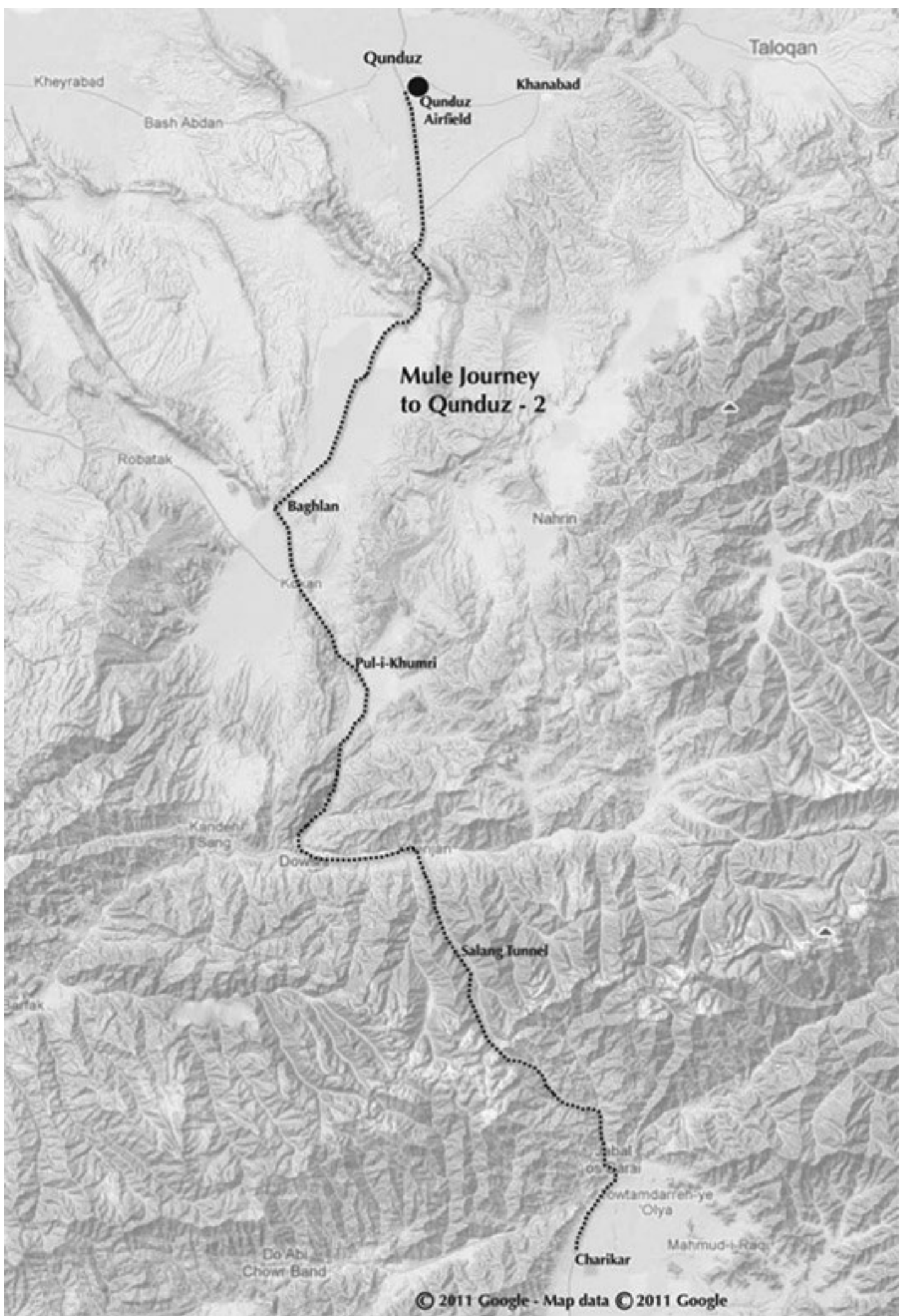
"[JazaakAllah](#) for your condolences, Brother Junaid. She's over there..." Abdul Majeed pointed to the four women and Latifa. "Let me take you to her."

With introductions completed, Junaid again expressed his sorrow at Abdul Latif's death, but also his pride at having known a man of his stature, a genuine hero of the Afghan people. Razya thanked him. She was pleased to learn of Junaid's longstanding association with her late husband, and expressed her wish to discover more about her husband's adventures with

him in Pakistan if circumstances permitted. Excusing himself, Junaid rejoined the men, who briefly shared their experiences of the journey from Laghar Juy. By late morning, they were on the move again, with Junaid and Iqbal atop the two spare mules, which were no longer needed as reserves.

Mule Journey to Qunduz - I





Finally, in the afternoon they were at the airfield. It was on a plateau some thirty meters above the Qunduz-to-Kabul road, with its runway arranged southeast to northwest. Access was at its western end by a service road that climbed through a small ravine to reach the plateau. There were a few hundred people there, mostly tired men but also women and children. At the back of the tiny cluster of airport buildings were several mules tethered to whatever was convenient and to each other. After entering the plateau, Sikander and his companions dismounted and Junaid motioned to a spot out on the apron of the airfield where the family group could gather while he and Sikander would take the mules to where the others were. Abdul Majeed, Iqbal, and Saleem escorted the women and Latifa to the spot and lay out their blankets and [chadors](#) on which to sit and later, sleep.

They had safely made the long and difficult journey to Qunduz with a day to spare before the first of the Pakistani aircraft was due to arrive. Now, it was time to wait.



Chapter 15

Sheberghan

FROM THEIR POSITIONS ON the high ground to the south of Qunduz, members of the American Special Forces and the Northern Alliance fighters looked on at the steady flow of people filing north out of the canyon, into the airport. [Pashtuns](#), [Uzbeks](#), [Arabs](#), [Pakistanis](#), and a smattering of white Caucasians made up the throng. Clearly this was more than just Pakistani [ISI](#) and military advisors, as had been promised to Washington when Musharraf had secured their safe passage. The onlooking soldiers were infuriated. As far as they were concerned, these evacuees wouldn't hesitate to slit the soldiers' throats given half a chance, yet here they were, calmly slipping away. Orders were orders, however, and these had come from the very top in Washington. But as soon as the last evacuee was loaded and the last flight had taken off, the soldiers had no confusion about what they would do with anyone left behind.

The waiting was hard to bear. Sikander and his companions understood, of course, that arriving too soon was better than too late, but poor Latifa was far from happy. The women made spirited attempts to soothe her but with the boredom and the last of the food gone, she would not be consoled.

Meanwhile, Junaid diligently sought out the other [ISI](#) officers among the milling evacuees, gathering them together to help organize things. Sikander was pleased to see that Junaid had found Iftekhhar who brought him over to reintroduce to Sikander and his fellow travelers. Compared to the prim and proper soldier Sikander recalled from their first meeting in Jamrud, Iftekhhar looked the worse for wear. After Shahi Kot, he had been in Kabul looking for evacuees and had seen intense bombardment of the city over the past couple of weeks. Even so, he was appropriately cordial.

The evacuees were to be organized into groups corresponding to airplane capacity. Each group was to consist of approximately a hundred and twenty-five individuals, which resulted in six groups as of that afternoon with more expected as more evacuees arrived. The C130 could take on about ninety-five fully equipped paratroopers, but without a soldier's full accoutrements, the aircraft could handle over a hundred and twenty swarthy, well-fed soldiers. Nobody at the airfield was swarthy or well fed.

Two C130s of Pakistan Air Force's Number Six Squadron were set to take off from Gilgit and Chitral, land at Qunduz, and fly to Peshawar to unload into a processing facility. From Peshawar, the aircraft would return to Qunduz, shuttling back and forth until the target evacuees were extracted or the safe passage window closed.

The Americans had authorized a hard stop for the safe corridor a minute before midnight on November 17. This would take place about a day after the start of the siege of the city, leaving one more day for the airlift to be completed. Anyone left behind after that, at the airport or in the city was, within the upcoming week, about to have the same luck as a Thanksgiving turkey.

After determining which of the [ISI](#) officers would act as the leader for each group, Junaid headed back to Sikander and his companions. It was nearing sunset.

Sikander was chatting with Saleem and Abdul Majeed, but turned around as he heard Junaid call his name. Junaid's enlarging silhouette was painted over the orange sky, the bright halo of the low sun behind him. Sikander put his hand to his forehead to shade his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asked as Junaid hurriedly approached.

"We're organizing everyone into planeloads and asking them to stay together. When the airplanes come in tomorrow, there'll be no time to lose and each group will be boarded in sequence. The flights ought to be about an hour and a quarter or so apart."

"What group are we in?"

"The sixth, I'm afraid. The first planes take off around ten in the morning, so we'll have to wait more than six hours for our flight, right about [asr](#) time."

"Actually, that news isn't all bad, Junaid. If I leave right after [fajr](#), at say seven in the morning, I'll be able to get to Qunduz, sell our mules, pick up some food, and be back in time for our flight."

"Sikander, are you sure there'll be time?" Abdul Majeed asked anxiously.

"I think so. With all these mules in tow, I can get there in, what, about an hour and a half, maybe?" Sikander replied. "If I can get them sold off and buy some food in say, two more hours, that would bring me up to ten thirty. Even if it takes longer I should still be back by early afternoon."

"Well, the ceasefire's good until the seventeenth, so even if you're delayed for any reason, there'll be more flights. That should be ample reserve," added Junaid.

People around the airport apron began gazing toward the sun, now hanging low in the southwestern sky. At this time in its monthly cycle, the thin sliver of a new crescent moon would be setting shortly after the sun, making it difficult to locate against the glare. It had extra importance, as it would mark the start of [Ramadhan](#) 2001, if seen. Aside from the canyon cut by the Qunduz River, the plain on which the airport was located continued all the way to some hills in the west, which at that distance, barely rose above the horizon. The airport was thus an ideal location from which to be searching for the crescent moon. As the sun's last embers disappeared behind the hills, a shout emerged from the main building's rooftop. The man who had spotted the crescent pointed eagerly in the direction of a ridgeline in the distant hills. Only minutes remained before it would follow the sun below the same hills.

It was barely visible but as others in the crowd began seeing it too, there was a cheer and a moment of solemnity as people raised their hands in prayer to wish for blessings in this most troubled of [Ramadhans](#) in recent times. Sikander and his family did the same and when the prayer was over and everyone had wished each other the appropriate blessings, there was a lull as people thought about all that was going on and how uncharacteristic of [Ramadhan](#) the events unfolding around them were. Many quietly rejoiced at the prospect of being out of the place in a few hours or at most a couple of days. Others ruefully reflected on all that they were now walking away from, including their homes, their friends, and their relatives, some of whom had been killed in only the last few days.

In Qunduz, the direction to face Makkah was in almost perfect alignment with the setting November sun and new moon. The [azaan](#) was called and the sunset prayer was performed, after which the group was able to unwind after the long journey.

Razya was pleased to reminisce with Junaid on the exploits of her late husband while on his many trips to Pakistan. Abdul Majeed and Saleem engaged Iqbal on small talk about the finer points of religious observance. The rest of the group simply relaxed.

After a little more than an hour, the time for [isha](#) came. On this occasion, the customary [Ramadhan taraweeh](#) prayer was added, making everyone both thoughtful and weary. Despite the nightlights of the airfield, no one had difficulty sleeping.

The following day would normally be the first fasting day, but as the people in the airport were all in a state of travel, they could permit themselves to suspend the fast. Many of them elected to do so. An hour before [fajr](#), those who were fasting arose to take their [suhur](#) meal with whatever provisions they had remaining and followed it with the usual fasting [niyyah](#). By [fajr](#) time, everyone was awake and prayer was conducted in small [jamaat](#) gatherings

within the designated groups of a hundred and twenty-five. Like most people nestled under blankets and [chadors](#) on the open tarmac, Sikander and his companions were hungry. Their stomachs had long forgotten the dried fruit from Pul-i-Khumri and were growling angrily. Sikander's idea of going into the city to sell the mules and buy some food seemed to be growing wiser by the minute.

"How much do you think you'll get for them?" Abdul Majeed asked.

"Not sure. Two thousand apiece, maybe? But I *am* sure they'll be in demand if there is to be a siege," replied Sikander.

"Here's a confirmation note to admit you back into the airport this afternoon," offered Junaid. "It's a precaution." Junaid handed Sikander a letter, signed with his pseudonym of Junaid, his rank, and his serial number. He advised Sikander to be sure to show it to the [ISI](#) officers standing guard at the airport entrance as he left and again upon his return. Junaid promised to make sure the [ISI](#) people would know to admit him in the unlikely event their flight group left before he returned.

"If, for any reason, we get split up, we'll be regrouping at the air base in Peshawar, and we'll wait for you there," he explained.

"Very well, but I'll be back before noon." Sikander replied.

Sikander went to where the mules had been tethered, mounted his own, and trailed the others behind him to the airport entrance. He explained what he was doing to the [ISI](#) officers, who made way for him to ride out. Taking the airport connector road to the main Qunduz road, and confident with all he had seen so far regarding this evacuation, he decided to use the actual road instead of tracking alongside it.

As he rode, Sikander mused over who his customers might be, imagining, in all likelihood, selling the mules to a [Taliban](#) buyer. He had never made a secret of not liking the [Taliban](#). However, he had given them leeway in his own mind based on their being poorly educated, often orphaned youth, misguided into an overly austere understanding of [Islam](#) with which few Muslim scholars agreed. So he understood something of their situation and they were, after all, fellow Muslims. The ride into the city didn't take as long as he expected.

Qunduz was an ancient city, once visited by Alexander the Great en route to his conquest of Bactria, a fact noted by Sikander when he read about it in school in Peshawar. It had registered with him that he'd been named after someone so illustrious, and however childish it might now seem, he was once again feeling a soldierly affinity with the great conqueror.

Although Qunduz was a [Taliban](#) stronghold, it had a mixed population of Tadjiks, Uzbeks, [Pashtuns](#), Hazaras, and others. It was a city on edge, awaiting its fate. Countless wars in the past had demonstrated what a bad idea it was to be on the losing side of any conflict in this part of the world.

As Sikander rode in with the mules ambling behind him, he asked some [Taliban](#) where he might trade them. They pointed him in the direction of a livestock bazaar on the east side of the city, a couple of kilometers away. He rode on to the small open-air market on the main road east out of Qunduz toward Khanabad.

After some animated haggling with the Uzbek vendor, Sikander eventually settled on twenty-two hundred Pakistani rupees each, which for the nine mules netted Sikander almost twenty thousand rupees in cash. Considering the circumstances, Sikander was upbeat from having seen the animals dealt with appropriately, and now being free to obtain food to take back to the airport. He was famished.

He turned west on the Khanabad Road back toward the center of the city and before long was greeted by the impossible to resist aroma of a bakery, locating the premises in short order. Sikander tethered his riding mule and ordered ample amounts of bread, [kebabs](#), and chickpeas to make up for his and his friends' abstinence of the last few days.

Having performed his last mission of the morning, he remounted his mule and headed down the main southbound thoroughfare toward the airport as he wrapped a [naan](#) around a [kebab](#), hastily dispatching the improvised combination.

His thoughts drifted to everyone back at the airport, anxiously anticipating the aircraft that would soon be arriving on this beautiful, brisk, and sunny morning. The trip had been a success and the prospect of leaving this war-ravaged country filled him with a sense of wellbeing.

Sikander's thoughts were suddenly interrupted, however, by a sharp stinging sensation below his left shoulder blade. As the feeling registered, he felt himself losing his balance, and then, blackness engulfed him.

Junaid looked at his watch for the fifth time in as many minutes, as if repeated examination might reveal some failing in its time-keeping. It was three-thirty in the afternoon. All day long the C130s had been coming in and going out just as planned. The sixth group was next and by now everyone in his family group was consumed by mounting anxiety for Sikander. No one could fathom how he could have been delayed or lost. No one wanted to contemplate the worst.

"What's keeping him?" demanded Junaid of the air around him. He, Iqbal, Abdul Majeed, and Saleem peered intently at the airport entrance on the far side, craning their necks to see if they could get a glimpse of a solitary rider on a mule, but without success.

"Brother Junaid," said Noor, arising from having been seated on the ground for too long, "why isn't he back yet? What do we do if he doesn't come back in time?" she asked nervously.

Junaid turned toward Noor leaving Abdul Majeed, Saleem and Iqbal on the lookout. "We'll have to leave without him, Sister," he uttered reluctantly. Recognizing, however, that she needed some hope for her son-in-law, he went on to tell her that there were still two more days of airlifting and that she shouldn't worry.

"He's probably had a much harder time of selling the mules than he was expecting. Qunduz is, after all, a big city, so maybe he's just gone from place to place." Junaid fought valiantly to cling to a conviction his doubts were doing their best to destroy.

With Noor wearing her [burkha](#) there was no way for him to see her skeptical eyes. He didn't need to. She was clearly worried, and he had told her nothing to alleviate her concern. Having known Sikander for over fifteen years, Noor understood him to be resourceful and intelligent. Whatever he was dealing with, at least for the moment, she drew more solace from this knowledge than from anything Junaid could say to her. While she pondered several awful possibilities, Junaid strolled briskly over to one of the other [ISI](#) officers who had been waving his arm over his head with a two-way radio in his hand.

Noor felt the hand of Razya gently weigh on her right shoulder as she looked down, feeling herself unable to hang onto even a shred of optimism.

"Noor," said Razya, "it's no good imagining the worst. We should be praying for the best for Sikander and that he makes it safely back." Fatima and Amina also rallied round her but their combined effect only invited Noor to unburden her feelings and she burst into tears.

The tears stopped abruptly but gave way to a sinking heart when suddenly, one of the others in their flight group cried out, "It's here!" The orange flashbulb of the afternoon sun glinting momentarily off the windshield of the approaching Hercules had just caught his eye. The aircraft was low in the southeastern sky. Almost immediately, everyone turned to see the black dot of its growing silhouette. Junaid returned to join his companions whose worries had by now multiplied from the urgency of the approaching aircraft.

"Why isn't he back? *Why?*" demanded Noor, continuing to sob. Junaid's face revealed everything he was thinking; yet he didn't want to volunteer

any answers. This was no time for half-truths, and platitudes.

“What’s the news, Brother Junaid?” asked Razya.

“We just have to hope and pray, sister, that Sikander’s all right and can make it for this flight. I have to admit that it looks unlikely, but it could be he’ll be on one of the others in the next two days. Right now we have the choice to stay or go and I recommend that given the dangers here, we should be going. At least *you* all should.”

“Dangers?” Noor asked, doing her best to hold back the tears.

“I’ve, uh, just learned that the Northern Alliance and Americans are beginning their siege this evening and...well...that there could be fighting tonight in Qunduz,” Junaid revealed.

Crushed, Noor was beyond saying anything. It was now impossible to believe that her son-in-law would be joining them.

“You said *we* should all go?” asked Saleem.

“Saleem, I have to stay here for him.” Junaid replied. “The siege will be on the city itself even though people coming in from the south, as we did, can still get into the airport. I’m afraid he’s going to have a tough time making it here. But if he gets through, I’ll be here for him for two more days.”

“Well can’t you—can’t we—go look for him?” asked Abdul Majeed. “We can miss this flight, too, can’t—”

“No! Abdul Majeed, we *can’t* go look for him.” Junaid was firm, his teeth clenched. “None of us can. The forces surrounding the city won’t permit it. It would put us all at risk. Abdul Majeed, Saleem, and you, Iqbal—you three have to take charge of this group and see them through to Peshawar. I’ll write down the address of Sikander’s home.” He turned to focus on Abdul Majeed and Saleem. “You should find any way to get to it—but Iqbal will be able to help if you have any difficulty. I’ll either bring Sikander with me if he gets here, [inshaAllah](#), or at the very least I’ll tell you whatever I learn. I’m...I’m sorry.”

Iqbal gave his father a look of worried suspicion.

“Iqbal, it’s okay. Look, at the very latest, with or without Sikander, I promise you I’ll be on the last flight.” Junaid answered his son’s unspoken question, adding a plaintive expression in Abdul Majeed’s direction to enlist his support for the decision. Reluctantly, Abdul Majeed nodded. He was consumed by guilt—guilt at having been so blinded into following the [Taliban](#) into a path of self-destruction; guilt at losing everything that had been accomplished by bringing some semblance of peace to Afghanistan after the Russians left. Above all else, he felt guilt that his cousin-in-law and good friend, who had risked his life to help them all come back as part of a family, might now be paying with his life for this to happen. Deep in such thoughts he couldn’t help turning his gaze away from the rest of his companions. Saleem looked on, similarly overcome.

The droning of the C130’s engines grew louder as the aircraft approached in a steep descent. Its wheels finally touched down, and almost immediately the pilot reversed pitch on the giant propellers, bringing the aircraft to rest in less than five hundred meters. The pilot retracted the landing flaps and made the turn toward the apron. Everyone in flight group six was asked to stand up, form a line four abreast, and head toward the opening rear ramp door. The engines would not be powering down, as the intent was to be out of there as soon as loading was complete, so the pilot feathered the props to a flat pitch, which minimized any blast that might hinder boarding.

“No, no! Sikander! [Zweecee!](#)” wailed Noor, as she resisted being escorted. Abdul Majeed and Saleem did all they could to reassure her that this was the best thing they could do right now. Shouting over the noise of the engines, they finally prevailed upon her to come with them and join the rest of the women.

Junaid looked on as the last of the passengers boarded and the ramp door started to close. He couldn’t see his own group as they were too far inside, but he waved nonetheless. He said a prayer of “[Fi-amanillah; Allah Hafiz](#)” to them as the pilot reset the pitch, throttled up, and taxied all the way to the far end of the runway. A few moments later, with the flaps set for takeoff, the engines revved to full power, the aircraft lurched forward, gathered speed, and was airborne. Junaid watched as the Hercules gained altitude and headed in the direction of the sun before making a sweeping arc back to the east, disappearing into the darkening blue distance.

Junaid hung back for the two remaining days and nights. Finally, when the last flight from Pakistan came in, he offered a prayer of hope for Sikander and with a heavy heart boarded it, continuing until the last minute to hope for that solitary figure riding on a mule to come galloping into the airfield. The hope remained unfulfilled.

Slowly, Sikander peeled open his eyes, while more slowly regaining consciousness. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious or where he was. All he could see was the beautiful crescent of the moon through an opening in the wall to his upper right. He was lying on a simple bed.

At first, he could barely recall what he’d been doing, where he’d been going, or just about anything of the moments leading up to his feeling the pain.

Pain! There was pain involved. What was it? Where? He tried to move and as soon as he did, a familiar, searing sensation made known its presence in the middle of his chest. He tilted his head forward and saw that he had been bandaged crudely just above his right fifth rib. He also saw blood. He lowered his head back onto the bed, still reeling from the pain he’d felt a moment earlier. Another pain came into focus behind his head and below his left shoulder and then another all the way down his left side. He cursed the consciousness that was putting him through this agony. He realized now, that he had been shot and the bullet had passed right through him.

After a few moments, the pain associated with his minor movement subsided to a level he could just about handle. His attention turned to whatever he might be able to recall. He looked toward the sky through the open window. The moon blinked. A solitary eagle owl had flown across its crescent, catching Sikander’s attention. He noted the relative darkness in the sky and the approximate size of the crescent. *Where am I? Who shot me? Will I survive? Survive! Yes! Have to survive! Rabia...children...have to get back. To Pakistan. To Peshawar.*

Threads of memory slowly wove the fabric of awareness back into an increasingly coherent whole. *Returning. I was returning to the airport to... to...make the airlift. Yes. It was the fifteenth when the crescent had been sighted. The crescent? Something’s wrong...it—oh, God...it must be two or three days old!*

Another dreadful awareness swept over Sikander. From the beautiful moon had emerged an ugly truth. It had to be November 17 or 18. Sikander had missed his ride out of Afghanistan.

With these realizations coursing through him, his spirit sank into an abyss of emptiness and he couldn’t help weeping while he worried about his situation and what might now be happening to him.

Ceasefire. There was a ceasefire! I shouldn’t have been shot! Who did this? Why? Sikander protested as if to some invisible referee. The game hadn’t been played by the rules.

The strain of all these thoughts and questions were too much for him as he again felt the sting in his lower right torso. Finally it dawned on him that

if he was in a bed, someone must have put him there. Someone wanted him alive. But he was feeling too exhausted to analyze why, as he drifted back to sleep.

The bright daylight was visible through the window but the sun must have been elsewhere in the sky, which was a deep blue at this time. It could have been morning or afternoon, but as it was the light that had awoken him, Sikander guessed it was probably morning. While he was contemplating the time of day, from behind the closed door, he heard voices approaching the room. Whether the result of a drugged stupor or rational clarity, he didn't feel concerned. If they were the ones who put him there, then he was supposed to be alive. If not, he would die now and get it over with. He was in no shape to put up a fight. The voices became clearer making it apparent they were speaking Dari. Sikander had no idea what they were saying.

The sound of keys jangling, a lock unlocking and the door swinging open was followed by the voices continuing into the room. Sikander pretended to be asleep and then to stir as if the noise of the two men's arrival had been the cause of his awakening. He looked at them and saw that one of them was balding and probably in his forties. He wore a dark brown [qamees](#) and [shalwar](#). He had some instrument or piece of plastic in the upper breast pocket of his [qamees](#) and in his hand was a translucent plastic bag containing what looked to Sikander like bananas and some other fruit. The other man was much younger, in his twenties, and was sporting a Kalashnikov with a bandolier around his body. He wore a cream-colored [pakol](#) similar to Sikander's own.

"Who are you? Where am I?" Sikander asked instinctively in [Pashto](#). His throat was parched and he was weak with hunger.

"Ah! Finally you awaken. We were hoping you'd be conscious by now," remarked the older man, switching to [Pashto](#) and in an affable tone. He seemed pleased, which was probably a good sign, thought Sikander. "Huh! You're lucky," he continued. "You were hit by a sniper. The bullet went through your back and missed almost everything! Just a little part of your left lung was impacted. I had to plug it for a while to prevent the lung from collapsing, but it's going to heal. You still need to rest but you're young and strong so it shouldn't take many days, perhaps a week, to be on your feet." The man poured water from a nearby bottle into a glass by the side of Sikander's bed then continued. "I'm Dr. Atiq Mohammed, and this is Rashid Ehsan. You're in Qunduz. Here, let me help you drink this."

The doctor sat by the bedside and helped Sikander to slake his thirst. "You may not know this, but Qunduz is under siege by the Northern Alliance. We found you on the street, bleeding but alive. We had driven the [Taliban](#) further back into the town where several thousand are holed up. We were negotiating their surrender," he said, "but the message doesn't always reach everyone all the time. The [Taliban](#) who shot you must have thought you were one of us. We thought the same thing initially."

Rashid Ehsan exchanged a glance with the doctor then looked back at Sikander. He pulled a piece of paper from his upper breast pocket. It seemed vaguely familiar to Sikander.

"We uh, found this on you," said Rashid. Sikander could see it was Junaid's letter to gain him re-entry to the airport. His eyes met Rashid's and then the doctor's, not knowing what to expect from the men who were helping him back to health.

"Yes, I was expecting to join my family heading back to Pakistan," remarked Sikander.

"We think it means you must be Pakistani [ISI](#) or at least an associate and that you were attempting to get out of the country with your [Taliban](#) friends," said Rashid. Inexplicably, Rashid had a smile on his face, suggesting little concern or even indignation toward Sikander, which even in his condition Sikander found puzzling.

"Huh! [Taliban](#) friends!" Sikander exclaimed with whatever disgust his injury allowed him, while he turned his head away from the two men.

"You being Pakistani, and not having left on the airlift, means you're the...uh...the subject of this..." said Rashid cryptically enough to regain Sikander's attention. Rashid held up another piece of paper. It was a leaflet of some sort, written in [Pashto](#), with a message suggesting a sizeable reward for turning in non-Afghan [Taliban](#) or al-Qaeda fighters.

Sikander read the flyer and cast his eyes back toward Rashid and then Dr. Atiq. "What does this have to do with me?"

"The Americans are looking for Pakistanis, Arabs, Chechens, and others who have been over here helping the [Taliban](#) and al-Qaeda. If you're Pakistani and didn't leave on any of those flights, you'll be considered one of these people. That means you're worth...um...almost five thousand dollars to us, especially if we can deliver you alive to the Americans when we meet up with them."

"But I'm not a [Taliban](#)!" protested Sikander, feeling his strength sapping away. He was too weak to mount an argument much less a fight about his status.

"Look, Sikander [Khan](#)," said Rashid as he re-examined Junaid's letter naming Sikander, "that kind of money is just too much to ignore. If you're innocent according to the Americans, then I've no doubt they'll let you go. If not then, well, then you'll have to deal with consequences. To us you're worth five thousand dollars regardless. But first we need to get you back to health and wait out the siege, so you need to rest." Rashid added.

Sikander stared at Rashid and then back toward Dr. Atiq. A bounty hunter doctor was something he couldn't come to terms with. Yet here was one staring back at him and seeing in his return to health a pecuniary benefit quite different from medical fees. Sikander was consumed by revulsion.

"You're weak and you must be very hungry. We've brought some fruit. It'll be best if you just take a little of it now," Atiq said, taking some bananas from the bag. They were the miniature variety, and he peeled a couple of them and put them by the side of Sikander's bed, next to the glass of water. He set the bag with the remaining fruit on the table before leaving the room with his partner, locking the door behind them.

Atiq and Rashid made two visits each day, bringing food and drink and tending to Sikander's wounds and bodily needs. Progressing faster than Atiq had expected, after only a few days, and with the continued attention of his captors, Sikander was able to sit upright on the bed. It was still a challenge to stand without support, but when he was finally able, he slowly maneuvered himself to the wall where the open window was located, and peered out. To his dismay, he could see that he was four stories above the street. Escape through the window was out of the question.

In Qunduz city, negotiations were underway between the [Taliban](#) and the Northern Alliance. Having suffered hundreds of losses through desertion or defection, the [Taliban](#) were in a corner. They offered to give themselves up in exchange for safe passage back to their homes and safe escort out of Afghanistan for the non-Afghan combatants. By November 22, surrender negotiations were complete and a force of some five thousand Northern Alliance troops made its way to Qunduz from Mazar-e-Sharif to take the surrendering force into custody. This would leave the [Taliban](#) holding just one major city in Afghanistan. Qandahar.

On Saturday, November 24, the [Taliban](#) surrendered en masse in Qunduz and fighting in the city was over. By now, Sikander was up on his feet and able to walk with minor assistance. His wounds had not completely healed but the process was well underway.

All that day, [Taliban](#) and al-Qaeda fighters were being herded, bound and immobilized, into groups out on the streets in different parts of the city. Altogether, between three and four thousand men had surrendered mostly without a fight, expecting to be sent home eventually.

Sikander's sense of foreboding was hard to suppress. He decided to focus on thoughts of escape but having confirmed his room was locked from the

outside and with him in no shape to break down the door, no avenue of escape seemed to present itself. Slowly, he began to rationalize his situation. In a curious way, he didn't seem to mind being a captive. Perhaps it was the courteous, though ill-motivated, treatment he was receiving or perhaps it was his own sense of needing to rest before attempting anything risky.

As the day drew to a close, it was clear that several new prisoners had arrived on the street, while several had already been taken away. That evening when the two men brought dinner up to Sikander, Atiq decided it was time to prepare him mentally for his impending departure.

"You've probably seen outside that they've started the transportation of prisoners. It will continue over the next few days," explained Atiq.

"We'll delay your transfer until the last day, considering your injury," added Rashid, hoping to keep Sikander calm. Sikander understood that argument was futile but he had one last idea.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

Rashid frowned with curiosity. "You're a pro-Taliban Pakistani with the ISI," he replied.

"No! That's not correct. I'm Sikander Khan, a Pakistani, it's true, but I'm a successful businessman based in Peshawar. I married an Afghan woman many years ago. I was a mujahid with your people against the Russians more than ten years ago. I came back to retrieve my wife's family and bring them to Pakistan. We came to Qunduz for the airlift. I just entered the city to dispose of some mules and obtain food when I was shot...so...so you see? I'm not the kind of person the Americans would be interested in. Besides, if you let me out of here and help me back to Pakistan, I could give you twenty thousand dollars." Sikander paused.

Atiq and Rashid looked intently at Sikander and then at each other before Atiq responded, "Mr. Sikander Khan, you might well be who you say you are, but by your own admission you're a Pakistani. The rest doesn't matter. The Americans are looking for foreigners and they will pay. We can't take a chance on your story. Maybe the Americans will understand and believe you and let you get home. We just want to be paid."

Sikander didn't have the energy to persist. It was a long shot and whatever moral deficits they might have had, these men weren't stupid. Sikander's thoughts turned once more to his seemingly inevitable future. Though he had never been there, he had a sense of familiarity with America and Americans. He could handle himself in English, and if he could survive long enough to be handed over to them, then perhaps his two captors were right and the Americans would let him go once they understood his story. He would just have to be patient. He completed his isha prayer and went to sleep. The following day was a virtual repeat of the previous one.



At a vast and ancient Persian fortress called Qala-i-Jangi, just outside Mazar-e-Sharif, November 25 was to be far from a repeat of anything, even by the standards of the latest conflict.

Being a fortress, Qala-i-Jangi was an ideal choice to house the Northern Alliance's newly arrived prisoners. On the previous day, several hundred Arabs and Pakistanis had surrendered to Abdul Rashid Dostum's troops under the assumption that they would be questioned and repatriated. Instead, they were imprisoned and made ready for questioning by American interrogators.

The prisoners had evidently not been searched and had concealed weapons with them. They had even used them to kill two of Dostum's officers. Even so, no security protocol was in place. On this day, they and other prisoners newly arrived from Qunduz were questioned about how and why they joined the Taliban and why they were there. At that moment, several of the prisoners jumped their questioner, CIA Special Activities Division Officer, Captain John Michael Spann. He fought them off first with an AK-47, and after emptying it, with his pistol until it, too, was empty. As the prisoners kept on coming, he fought hand-to-hand until they mobbed him, scratching and gnawing at him until he died. His partner, Dave Tyson, also emptied his AK-47 on the assailants. Unsure of the extent of the prisoners' armament, the Northern Alliance fighters, Tyson, and some news crews who had been there to film the prisoners took refuge in the northern part of the fort.

In Johnny "Mike" Spann, America's global war on terror suffered its first combat casualty, and the CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia, had yet another star—its 79th—carved into the wall of fallen heroes and painted the customary black. It would later lighten with age and match the gray of its neighbors.

Qala-i-Jangi had been well known to the Taliban and they made for the weapons armory at its southern end, which enabled them to take control of the entire southern half of the massive nineteenth century fort. In the northern part of the fort, Tyson managed to use the TV news crew's satellite phone to contact the U.S. embassy in Uzbekistan asking for reinforcements. American air strikes were called in over the southern half of Qala-i-Jangi. In addition, a Soviet era T-55 tank was moved into the fortress compound and fired on the southern half. Several bombs were dropped on the armory but the prisoners were doggedly persistent.

The following day, the battle of Qala-i-Jangi raged on. Northern Alliance soldiers directed mortar fire at the prisoners and again called in close air support. By nightfall, so-called "smart bombs" were dropped, but in confusion over coordinates, one close air support team directed bombing onto its own coordinates by mistake, killing and injuring several Northern Alliance fighters as well as injuring four British Special Forces personnel. By late that night, two AC130 Specter gunships circled overhead, firing into the armory and setting off several explosions. Fires raged into the night.



On the morning of November 26, Rashid and Atiq returned for Sikander and woke him. He had gone to sleep after performing fajr. With his recovery progressing well, Sikander's expectation of being turned over to the Americans had grown more palatable. He would reason with them; convince them of his true situation and purpose. At least he could expect humane treatment, in stark contrast to what he recalled from the many stories Abdul Latif had told him about the civil war following the Soviets' departure. Neither the Taliban nor the Northern Alliance had demonstrated meaningful codes of conduct for treatment of prisoners during that conflict, and unless there was bargaining value, surrender would as likely as not be followed by massacre. Now, with the return of his captors, the time had come for him to discover precisely what treatment he would be receiving and at whose hands.

While Rashid held the gun on Sikander, Atiq tied his hands behind his back with a scrap of cloth. They marched him carefully down three flights of stairs and onto the street. As he came out, similarly bound Taliban prisoners were still being brought into the street and made to sit cross-legged on the ground to await transportation. Those of them who were not Afghan were to be transported separately as "high value" captives not to be mixed up with the others.

Rashid held guard over Sikander while Atiq talked with a Northern Alliance fighter who seemed to be in charge of transporting the prisoners. After an exchange in Dari bearing the unmistakable signs of haggling, Atiq was handed some money by the man. Sikander was clearly being sold, and although they would be paid less than the full five thousand dollars, Atiq and Rashid would be rid of him and free to go about their own business, while the buyer would collect the full amount on turning Sikander over to the Americans.

With the transaction complete, the man approached Sikander, his boots kicking up dust in their wake. Barking something unintelligible, he grabbed Sikander's arm and pulled him toward a gathering of what were plainly non-Afghan prisoners, including several from Pakistan. Sikander never saw Rashid and Atiq again. Strange men, who had treated him well to get him to health, only to sell him.

The Northern Alliance leaders in Qunduz had arranged for shipping containers to be used to transport prisoners to the jail at Qala-i-Jangi fort. Over a dozen containers were lined up alongside each other. Sikander saw the [Taliban](#) prisoners being herded into each one, and only when they were crammed full were the doors closed and sealed. There must have been at least two hundred men in each of the long containers, Sikander guessed. Although the negotiated commitment not to shoot the [Taliban](#) was being honored, packing them into containers in that manner was likely to be deadly to many of them given a long enough trip. Sikander stared at them, imagining such a journey, when suddenly the man who had paid for him, having brought along several other helpers, pushed him and about four-dozen other prisoners harshly toward a much smaller container.

The container doors were closed and the space became immediately dark with the exception of thirteen large caliber bullet holes in the metal walls glowing white with daylight. After a few moments, Sikander could make out the others' faces from just that small amount of light. Dark and silent, they awaited their fate. Following some metal-on-metal banging and clanging sounds, the men inside groaned as the container lurched and swayed like some evil fairground ride, until it came to rest. They could hear it being secured. A moment later, with a jolt, the truck began moving.

Sikander was leaving Qunduz.

The truck proceeded out from the south side of the city back to Baghlan and Pul-i-Khumri. Every bump in the road seared Sikander's wounds. But soon, his attention shifted to a more ominous issue. The air in the container became stifling. The men inside were burning oxygen faster than the thirteen tiny holes could replenish it and before long a sense of panic began brewing. Sikander asked aloud if anyone spoke Urdu, [Pashto](#), or English. Almost everyone was able to answer positively. Sikander proposed that each man place his mouth over a hole for five minutes in turn. That would allow each person access with about twenty minutes between turns. Meanwhile, those awaiting a turn were asked to consume the least possible oxygen by sitting perfectly still, not panicking, and breathing slowly. Some of the [Pashto](#) speakers could also speak Arabic and communicated the same information to their "Arabic-only" companions.

The truck ride was an unrelenting black hell. Often vomiting on each other in the darkness, the occupants of the container had to endure hours of tossing and swaying, especially while the truck was moving through canyon country. Sikander couldn't help wondering how the other, more crowded container travelers might have fared.

That night, as the truck rolled into the area of Qala-i-Jangi, those of the men in the container who were still conscious could hear sounds of gunfire, heavy weapons, and bombing. From the bright flashes lighting up each bullet hole on one side of the container, they could only imagine what might be going on. But the reality of the raging battle was beyond any imagining. Unlike the prisoners, the truck driver could see everything. Angry tracer rounds rained down from the circling AC130 gunships while the din of explosions came from behind the fort's twenty-meter high walls. Every so often, bright flashes, silhouetting the fort's walls to all outsiders, punctuated the night's blackness.

"Qala-i-Jangi," Persian for "fortress of war," was sadly living up to its name, far beyond anything ever dreamed of by its long-dead creators. Guards were at the perimeter two kilometers away, which was where the truck carrying Sikander came to a rest.

"Foreigners from Qunduz," declared the truck driver with about the same matter-of-fact tone as if he'd been describing a haul of rice.

"You can't bring them here now," came the response from the Northern Alliance guard.

"What then?" asked the driver testily. He was tired and in no mood to mess around. With all that he could see going on, it wasn't hard to accept a new destination, but he still needed to know where to go.

"Wait there," replied the guard, before disappearing to talk on the radio. After a few minutes he came back.

"Sheberghan," shouted the guard. "Take them to Sheberghan. American Special Forces are there and they'll know what to do with your cargo."

Uttering Dari profanities, the driver rolled up the window, reversed out of the fort area, and drove on. He cursed the guard, cursed Dostum, then Bush and Bin Laden for his need to remain awake to take his haul another eighty kilometers from Qala-i-Jangi. Inside the container, in the pitch-blackness dotted by thirteen ultra-faint whispers of moonlight, Sikander heard moans and groans but the container was quieter than it had been earlier. He was parched and struggled to remain conscious. He also feared that his internal wound might have reopened as he could feel wetness on the front of his [gamees](#). Slowly, the whispers of light from the now almost full moon coming through the bullet holes turned orange-pink before becoming white. It was daybreak. The sun was up when the truck finally came to a rest at Sheberghan prison. The door seal was broken and the doors swung open.

To the Northern Alliance fighters and the American Special Forces soldiers it was as if they had moved a rock to reveal disgusting insects scurrying in response to the sudden exposure to air and light. The creatures inside began to stir. Some had been lying, some sitting, some on top of others, and some unconscious with their heads against the metal walls of the container. Out of the truck came the stench of death, vomit, urine, and other indescribably foul smells. Sikander could see blood smeared over the front of his [gamees](#). Mercifully, it wasn't from his wounds. Several bodies were randomly scattered among the living, with no pose unique to either condition. Only the glazed and ghastly open stare of the eyes of the dead gave them away. After taking a moment to get over the shocking sight, the guards began dragging the prisoners out of the container.

"That's all?" asked one of the American paramilitaries, quickly covering his nose and mouth with his one free hand.

"Yes," replied the Uzbek officer accompanying him. "These are from Qunduz. They should have been deposited at Qala-i-Jangi, but...well, you know what's happening there."

"Yeah...raghead bastards!" uttered the paramilitary as he told the others to drag them out and take the dead and dying away into the desert southwest of Sheberghan to bury them. "Take the walking ones inside. We'll hold 'em here until we figure out what to do." The man turned to address the prisoners. "Down!" he yelled in [Pashto](#). Sikander finally stepped out into the almost blinding light.

However brief that moment of fresh air, Sikander savored every millisecond of it. He was barely able to move and as he shuffled toward the building into which they were being led, he began to cough and saw a fresh stain forming on his [gamees](#). This time it was from inside. He staggered for a while and was caught by an Uzbek guard as he began sinking to the ground.

"He needs attention!" said the guard, looking in the direction of an American soldier. The soldier paused for a moment, then calmly strolled toward Sikander. Being with Special Ops, he had a Kalashnikov, and used its muzzle to lift up Sikander's [gamees](#). The wound and dressing were plainly visible. Without a word, he gestured to the guard to walk Sikander over to the prison hospital.

The battle of Qala-i-Jangi continued raging throughout that day and for a few more. Eventually eighty-five surviving prisoners from among the hundreds that had been brought there surrendered one more time as they were without weapons, ammunition, and food. Now they were systematically being flooded while occupying the basement of the fort's armory. It was from this group that the so-called American [Taliban](#), John Walker Lindh, emerged with a wound to the leg and was taken back to the United States for recovery, detention, and trial.



From the moment Junaid had shown up at Sikander's home without him, everyone was plunged into anguish over the fate of the head of their household. Rabia was too distraught for words, consumed by her own sense of culpability. She had felt a foreboding from the very outset of Sikander's mention of the adventure and now her worst fears were being realized. Indeed, Sikander's absence was made all the more acute by the ordinarily joyous month of [Ramadhan](#), amplifying her misery along with everyone else's.

Living in Hayatabad, Junaid often came to visit them. His membership of the [ISI](#) gave him a better grasp of things and that provided some comfort to Sikander's family. One of his sources was Arif. Not long after his return to Pakistan, Junaid went up to see Arif in Jamrud. Arif had his ear to the ground for all kinds of news and information that wasn't to be found on CNN or the BBC. He was disappointed to learn of Sikander's disappearance, but like many people who knew Sikander, Arif seemed to believe that the young man's resourcefulness would probably see him through. He was, however, devastated to learn of the death of Abdul Latif. The two had known each other for more than twenty years, since the Soviet invasion back in 1979. Still, he marveled at learning of the manner of his friend's passing, which he, and just about anyone else who heard of it, could only describe as enviable.

A week passed and the news from Afghanistan was bad. The uprising at Qala-i-Jangi was all over the media. At one and the same time, in grim antisymmetry, it revealed the first American combat casualty and the emergence of an American [Taliban](#). A less well-known fact was that the uprising and the many subsequent suffocation deaths among the container loads of prisoners largely involved men who had surrendered in Qunduz.

Junaid was at Sikander's home visiting when CNN first broke the news of the battle. Rabia pressed him into confirming her grasp of what was being shown. She simply couldn't continue watching it without becoming frenzied from imagining the worst for her beloved husband.

"It's a massacre," said Junaid softly, shaking his head in disgust. "It looks like things got out of control in the prison yesterday. That's where the [Taliban](#) captives from Qunduz had been taken. Several... several hundred [Taliban](#) have been killed, and the battle's still going on." Each word pierced his soul.

Sikander, why did you listen to me!? [Ya Allah](#) bring him back—just...just bring him back! Rabia half prayed and half wept as her two young sons looked on. They missed their father too, but it was hard to watch their mother cry and berate herself. Rabia arose to escape into the lounge. Junaid and Sofie followed.

"We don't know anything about where he is, whether he left Qunduz before the surrender. Even if he remained, he's a strong and intelligent enough person, Rabia," said Junaid reassuringly. "He'll get himself out of trouble. Don't worry so."

"Junaid [bhaji](#), what can we do? What can we *do*? There has to be *something*?" implored Rabia through her tears.

Sofie placed a tender, supportive hand on her daughter-in-law's shoulder. "Rabia, Junaid [bhaji](#)'s right. We have to be patient and pray to Allah, who listens even more intently to worthy individuals in [Ramadhan](#). Pray for his safe return."

Jamil called out from beyond the lounge. He and Kausar, were just leaving the TV room: "Sameena's here."

Sameena drove in through the front gate together with husband, Wasim. "[Assalaamu 'alaykum!](#)" she called out as she hurried into the lounge to sit with the others. Sameena had met Junaid on one of his earlier visits and tipped her head toward him in a gesture of greeting. She saw Rabia's wet cheeks and approached her for a sympathetic hug.

"Rabia [bhabhi](#)!" offered Sameena. "Look, I may have some good news," she added cautiously, speaking in English. Her time studying at the LSE, coupled with the near constant use of it in her father-in-law's family home, made it her preferred medium and she felt a certain bond with Rabia through the language.

Rabia suspended her whimpering, adopting a hopeful expression as she wondered what news Sameena might have and how it might relate to Sikander. "News?" she asked, sniffing.

"Well, you remember my father-in-law knows Gen...um...President Musharraf well, and when he heard what had happened in our family he thought to ask Musharraf if he could pass along the query about Sikander [bhaji](#)."

"What do you think can be done, Sameena?" asked Sofie. Overhearing the conversation, Jamil entered the lounge.

"I'm not exactly sure, but let's say, for example, that he was captured. From what I'm able to learn, there seems to be a priority among the Americans to interrogate Pakistanis. Junaid [bhaji](#), you said he had a paper signed by you, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," said Junaid catching Sameena's drift. "I did, and if they found that on him, at least it could confirm he's one of Musharraf's own people who failed to make the airlift. Perhaps if they take him into their custody there might be a chance to find him and have him returned to us, [inshaAllah](#)."

"That's right Junaid [bhaji](#)," replied Sameena. "So we have to get Musharraf to act. Please continue to pray for Sikander [bhaji](#) to be alive and to return soon."

Although this development offered hope, it challenged them to wait, monitor the news, and remain in touch with Wasim's father. Throughout this time Sofie was a pillar of strength. She just knew her son was alive. The knowledge was deeply seated in her being. But for Rabia, still grief-stricken by the news a week earlier of her uncle's death, the waiting and hoping were unbearable. She had to direct all her available effort to cling to hope; a hope that refused to be separated from thoughts of the terrible consequences of being dashed.



Chapter 16

Jahannam

SHOES TAPPING ON A hard concrete floor greeted Sikander's emerging consciousness. The air was notably fresh. There was something important about that. Sikander couldn't recall what it was, but as his head began to clear, the air's essential contrast with what lurked in his mind triggered his recollection. He was immediately overcome by memories of a dark day, of evil blackness, accumulating death, and foul air. Sinister, stifling air. He wept into his pillow as he thought of young men, foreigners, mostly from Pakistan, who had surrendered themselves with naïve expectations. Along with the silent tears, his mind and spirit seemed to be draining away.

Adrift without anchor in either dimension, Sikander lacked any sense of time or space. It hadn't been possible for the container occupants to overhear the new destination given to the truck driver during the night, and Sikander was beyond paying attention to any signs he might have seen as he staggered out of the container the following morning. All he could recall from that moment was a detached but misplaced euphoria from having survived. He struggled to move his head and saw several beds lining two walls of the room. The beds' occupants appeared to be immobilized; amputees, people with splints and casts on their limbs, others with no obvious injury. Double swing doors, each with a round window, were in the middle of an end wall. From what he could see, he was in a hospital ward, and a very basic one at that. Still in a relative daze, through the glass in the doors he could make out guards. He let his head relax back into the pillow and fell asleep.

A couple of hours passed, when he was awoken. The focus of his opening eyes slowly settled on the weathered face of a middle-aged nurse who laid a tray on his bedside table with a simple meal of buttered bread and onions, before proceeding to change the dressing on his wound.

Wound. I have a wound, he thought. "Where? Where is this?"

With a troubled expression, she discreetly checked to her left and right, then whispered in [Pashto](#), "Hospital. Sheberghan prison hospital."

Sikander nodded his gratitude.

"You've been here two days," she added. "Asleep mostly."

Deprived of sleep on the way from Qunduz, Sikander had suffered further blood loss on top of his general weakness from the now two-week-old bullet wound.

Five days later, on December 2, Sikander had two visitors. They were American soldiers. Unlike Special Forces, these men wore the regular [BDU](#). First Lieutenant Bryers was a white Anglo-Saxon with a long thin face and the slightest hint of freckles. He couldn't have been much more than twenty-two, Sikander estimated. Captain Valdez, a Latino, was a thickset individual, about the same age and build as Sikander. His narrow eyes and downturned mouth projected earnestness.

"Is he coming?" Valdez asked Bryers.

"He's on his way, sir."

Sikander didn't volunteer his knowledge of English until he could be confident of who these men were.

The doors swung again and another man in a U.S. military uniform came through. His name, surprisingly to Sikander, was [Khan](#).

"Let's get on with it, Lieutenant [Khan](#). You know the routine. Name, where he was captured, and why he was there," said Valdez.

[Khan](#) translated the questions into [Pashto](#).

Well, look at you. Indian? Afghan? Maybe even Pakistani? Sikander reflected. He thought about whether or not to speak in English, but decided it would look bad if he didn't. They didn't seem in any mood to be played with.

Sikander shifted his gaze and locked eyes with Valdez: "My name is [Khan](#). Sikander [Khan](#). I was shot in Qunduz right at the beginning of [Ramadhan](#). I was brought back to health by some people who sold me to one of your...your buyers. I've been in Afghanistan since the end of October trying to get my wife's family out of the country after you people began your bombing."

Valdez's eyes widened reflexively as he looked at Bryers. Lieutenant [Khan](#) stared at Sikander with a look of disdain, as if to ask why he and his ilk were so bent on bringing their name into disrepute by associating with terrorists.

"Well! Seems we have a brother or cousin o' yours, lieutenant!" said Valdez, smiling. [Khan](#) didn't respond. Valdez paused for a moment and with his eyes on Lieutenant [Khan](#), waved his head in the direction of the doorway. The young lieutenant saluted and left without another word.

"Okay," Valdez said, "I guess you can speak my language, Mister [Khan](#). So, what are you going to tell me about the [Taliban](#) and al-Kayda?"

"Captain. I came to arrange for my wife's family to come back with me to Pakistan, out of harm's way. None of them are [Taliban](#) or al-Qaeda. They were from a village called Laghar Juy, which is south of Jalalabad in Nangarhar. We spent over ten days walking and riding by mule to get to Qunduz, where the Pakistani Air Force had arranged for some people to be flown to Pakistan. It was Musharraf"—he paused to regain the strength to continue—"Musharraf who arranged the airlift with your Vice President Cheney."

"Mmmhmm..." responded Valdez. "And how come they left you behind? Sounds as if your in-laws are like mine!" Valdez popped a chuckle amid the seriousness. "You people!" Valdez continued, shaking his head. "Each story's wilder than the last guy's! Creative though, I have to hand it you." The cynical tone lingered another moment before Valdez adopted a more serious expression and continued. "Mr. [Khan](#), from where I'm standing? Sounds like bullshit. Smells like bullshit." Slowly, he leaned over the edge of the bed, his nose a few centimeters from Sikander's. "You understand..." Valdez spliced the word, "...bull, shit?"

Pressing his head back into his pillow, Sikander gave a cautious nod. Valdez straightened, pondering for a moment.

"Okay. Suppose you're right and you did come—like you said," Valdez shrugged. "Why didn't you stay with your friends?"

"I had taken our mules into Qunduz, expecting to sell all but one of them, get some food, and return to the airfield to my people so that—"

"Food?" cut in Valdez with a frown. Sikander nodded. "Wasn't it [Ramadhan](#)? I thought it was [Ramadhan](#). Weren't you all supposed to be fasting?"

Leaving that aside for a moment, if you were going to fly back to Pakistan, why did you need food? Didn't you think there would be any on the flight? How long could the flight have been? It's not real convincing, now. Y'hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Oh, no, for traveling Muslims it's not required to fast," replied Sikander. "And we'd last obtained food in Pul-i-Khumri, a couple of days earlier. The food ran out and we were hungry from the journey, before [Ramadhan](#) had started."

"Hm. We can check on that, but I have to tell you, Mr. [Khan](#), you're not making a lot of sense right now. I mean, you're picked up with a bullet wound in a major hotbed of fighting. Biggest damn surrender in this whole war's taken place. You're from the largest group of non-Afghan hostiles—Pakistanis—and you're giving me this...this guacamole about rescuing in-laws from some village hundreds of miles away? Do us all a favor and tell me something I can hang my hat on!"

"Captain, I'm Sikander [Khan](#). I have a business in Peshawar called Javelin, and—"

“Peshawar?”

Sikander nodded.

“Okay. Tell me, Mr. [Khan](#), you said your in-laws were from a village south of Jalalabad? If you’re from Peshawar, how in God’s name did you find someone to marry all the way out there?”

“It’s the truth, sir,” replied Sikander, struggling to avoid tearing up over the effort to be convincing.

“Oh. The truth,” replied Valdez, nodding with raised eyebrows in mock acceptance of appearing to have absorbed something of significance. “Well, let me see,” he began counting on his fingers, “you’re in Kundooz, you’re with none of the people you say you were traveling with, you have a bullet wound, you’ve confessed to being Pakistani. Want me to go on?” asked Valdez pointedly.

“Captain, I can provide you with the details of my business, my address, my phone numbers and—”

“I could give a rat’s ass about your business!” Valdez declared, emitting another chuckle. “I care that you were here fighting alongside the enemy. Hell, if you have money that makes you more dangerous!”

Sikander had no reply. Valdez unwound his fishing reel a little.

“Look; I’d like to help you out of this if you’re really telling me the truth about what you were doing in Qunduz, but so far you’re not giving me anything to believe in.” Valdez seemed to be projecting a genuine concern that the right thing be done. But while Sikander could provide all kind of details about his life in Pakistan, he could say nothing to disprove his support for the [Taliban](#) or al-Qaeda. He held a shrug and slowly shook his head. Valdez sighed in resignation.

“I guess he’s sticking to his story...for now,” muttered Valdez, as he flatly pronounced, “Bagram,” while signing something official-looking that Bryers presented to him.

Three weeks after Sikander was shot, the American-led and backed Northern Alliance forces, which for five years had had no answer to the [Taliban](#), now held the north of the country. Meanwhile, the Eastern Alliance under Hamid Karzai held the remainder. The war to remove the [Taliban](#) was over. Sikander’s predicament was not.

Having recovered from his reopened wound, Sikander was moved out of the hospital and was now in a single cell. But it was a blessing compared with the hell-trip out of Qunduz.

Valdez never came back. At first Sikander was curious as to why he was no longer of interest. But the talk with Valdez had only been an initial screening, and as his answers had not been satisfactory, the more expert facilities of the Bagram Collection Point, awaited him at the sprawling Bagram Air Base.

Unfortunately for Sikander, Valdez’s report wrote him up as “unconvincing, uncooperative, wounded and captured in Kunduz—requires further interrogation, English speaking Pakistani. Profile—better than 75% probable al-Qaeda or [Taliban](#). Probable combatant, money-man, or both.”

A week later, along with other prisoners, Sikander was taken in the back of a truck from Sheberghan to Bagram. He was hooded and made to wear earmuffs to mute external sounds. His hands were manacled, his waist had a belly chain, and his ankles were shackled. Apart from the jostling caused by the truck he felt he was trapped inside himself, with little awareness of his environment other than feeling colder. He was his own prison cell.

Eight hours later, the truck stopped. Sikander was led out by a hand gripping his arm. He made the small shuffling steps imposed on him by the shackles and entered a much warmer place. He was in one of Bagram’s vast hangars built by the Russians, like the rest of the entire base, after the 1979 invasion. Separated from the other prisoners, Sikander was led through a concertina-wire clad cage used as a sally port, into a larger holding pen. He was disoriented, imagining it was still sometime in the afternoon. When the hood and muffs were finally removed, he could see through some windows in one of the far hangar walls that it was dark outside.

Removing only one restraint at a time, his captors made him strip to receive a full body cavity search. He was also photographed. With his clothes back on, he was taken to a holding cell.

A month passed.

During that time, Sikander had only cursory interaction with guards and short spells of exercise, though always manacled and shackled. Finally, on January 8, he was visited by an interrogator.

“[Khan](#)? From what I see here, you understand me, don’t you?” Sikander looked up at the officer. He was a major with “Duke” written on his name label.

Duke was in his late thirties and seemed to be a person who cared about his appearance. His [BDU](#) was a little neater than most others Sikander had seen. His Farragut, Tennessee, drawl made just about everything he uttered sound almost affable. A career soldier, he loved his job, and was looking for this war to make the next mark on his résumé.

“Major Duke,” Sikander said as he stood up. “Yes, I can understand what you’re saying.”

“Gooood!” Duke responded with a grin. “That means we’re going to be able to communicate and it will always be better for you if we can communicate.” Duke’s tone was amiable and engaging. He shuffled through some papers and what looked like a printed report. While fixing his gaze on the report, he called over a guard to bring Sikander out of his cell and walk him the short distance to a makeshift room set up against the hangar’s wall.

“I want you to understand something, Mr. [Khan](#). Things don’t look too good for you from the information we have. If you want to avoid a bad future, you’re going to need to provide us with a more convincing story than what you’ve been selling so far.” Duke made eye contact with a seemingly sympathetic frown. “You understand me?”

Sikander nodded.

“Do you understand me?” Duke repeated politely but firmly.

“Yes,” replied Sikander.

“Good. Now, it says here you were looking for your family? Why? Where are you from originally?”

“Major Duke, the report is incorrect. I wasn’t looking for my family. I was re-joining them, and I had helped them to a safe evacuation out of Qunduz airfield by the Pakistan Air Force in the middle of November, right at the start of [Ramadhan](#).”

“How’d you get shot?”

“I don’t know. I had just sold the mules we’d used to travel to Qunduz from a village south of Jalalabad. I’d gone to a bakery, picked up some food, and was heading back to the airport. The doctor treating me said that a bullet struck me from behind.”

“Do you remember when?”

“It was the morning of November sixteenth, the morning after we’d seen the setting of the new moon from the airport, marking the start of

[Ramadhan.](#)”

“And how come you weren’t with your family? How come you went into Kundooz when you must’ve known the place was surrounded?”

“I had the understanding that we had three more days before a siege was to be put on Qunduz. I don’t know, I felt it would be safe. We...we were hungry.

“Anyway, all I remember is that I was in the hands of two Northern Alliance people, one of them a doctor...doctor Atiq...who treated me for the injury. They held me prisoner so that they could sell me. They showed me a leaflet from your military which promised thousands of dollars for turning people—al-Qaeda people—over to your forces.”

Duke hastily wrote something down before continuing. “How do I know you weren’t an al-Kayda fighter, shot by the Northern Alliance [mujahideen](#) and turned over to us?”

Duke’s use of “[mujahideen](#)” arrested Sikander. He surprised himself with his own resentment at being cast as their enemy by this non-Muslim soldier, when he had endured so much to earn the distinction of being called a [mujahid](#).

“I can’t answer that, sir,” replied Sikander. “I don’t know how to prove I’m not a member of some organization.”

“Not a good idea to get cute with me.” Duke’s advisory tone conveyed his irritation. Sikander didn’t continue. The major launched into a more direct form of questioning, his demeanor becoming more aggressive by simply shortening his questions.

“Let’s go over your history. Born where?”

“Pakistan, Peshawar.”

“Where’s your home now?”

“It’s in the suburb of Hayatabad to the west of Peshawar.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I run a business called Javelin. We wholesale electrical products.”

“Uhuh. Doing well is it?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Where’d you go to school?”

“University Public School, in Peshawar. Not far from—”

“Father, mother, names?”

“My father was Javed Wahid [Khan](#) and my mother’s name is Sofie [Khan](#).”

“Brothers? Sisters?”

“Yes. I have one brother, Jamil, and one sister, Sameena.”

“When did you finish high school?”

“I...I didn’t finish, sir. I left before completing high school so that I could fight against the Russians. That’s what brought me to Afghanistan in 1986, and it’s how I met my wife.”

“What’s her name?”

“Rabia.”

“Children?”

Duke’s questions prodded Sikander into one of his recurring torments over his family’s certain anguish over his disappearance. It had been months since he’d seen them and each passing day since his capture had seemed like a week. A sharp crack on the head interrupted his mental digression. He reeled in pain, his manacled hands unable to reach and soothe the place where the blow had struck.

“Children,” demanded Major Duke. His voice bore a new cold, and menacing tone.

“Yes!” cried Sikander. “Two boys!” He made a reflexive but futile attempt to dissipate the pain, grimacing and waving his head about slowly.

“Names?” asked Duke.

“Ayub and Qayyum.”

With his initial questioning out of the way, Duke paused to write yet more notes and now with an intense frown, began once more, “Mr. [Khan](#), I don’t want to tell you that you’ve just told me a pack of lies. Let’s suppose *everything* you told me is true. You have your business, your wife, your kids, and all the other things, but what if you felt like coming back to Afghanistan because you hate America and suppose you’d seen—” Duke shrugged, “CNN, and thought, you know? I should go over there and help the al-Kayda folks against these infidel Americans. Now how would I know—just from what you’ve told me, mind you—that you didn’t do that?”

“I didn’t,” replied Sikander wearily. “Until now I have always liked America. Your country made it possible for me to fight the Russians. I never met any al-Qaeda people. I don’t agree with their views. I...” Sikander could think of nothing else to add.

“Uhuh!” Duke snickered. “Do you know how many people who love America I’ve met in the last ten days? A Pakistani, caught in Kundooz, coincidentally the very area the [Taliban](#) and al-Kayda people had retreated to. Most of the non-Arab, non-Afghans came from Pakistan, from all walks of life, I might add, and now, now that you’ve been caught? Why, you *love* America! Now what I want is the truth. I want to know all the details of any plans you’re aware of. I want to know dates. I want to know places. Names of people you were with. Names of leaders. What do they have cookin’? Where are they hidin’?” demanded Duke. Having bought Sikander’s claims of owning a business he was increasingly convinced he was using his money to aid the enemy. That made Sikander a prisoner of above average value.

“Major, I don’t have any al-Qaeda connections. I’ve never met any of them. How can I convince you of that!?” Sikander pleaded.

“Can’t spend all day with you, Mr. [Khan](#). I’m not gettin’ your cooperation and there are people who know how to do this way better than I do. You’ll be seein’ them soon enough!”



[Ramadhan](#) was long finished and 2002 had begun. In Pakistan, ‘[Eid-ul-Fitr](#)’ celebrations were subdued. Adding to the tensions from the war in neighboring Afghanistan, a new crisis was brewing. An attack on the Indian Parliament had resulted in several policemen, a gardener, and the six attackers being killed. The Indians blamed the militia groups, [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#), and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Pakistan was accused by India of having sponsored them and provided safe havens for their training. Along with the diplomatic furor, each country’s troops were amassed along their shared

border.

The Pakistani leadership continued to insist on the legitimacy of the Kashmiri people's separatist movement, which the accused militias had, originally at least, been fighting for. Most people agreed, however, that they had recently become much more focused on Islamist militancy than on achieving a new political reality in Kashmir.

In mid-January, Pervez Musharraf gave a speech suggesting that extremism would be combated within Pakistan but that Pakistan still claimed full rights to Kashmir. This seemed to defuse the tensions and a stand-down by both sides soon followed. In these times, however, as Rabia, Sofie, and the family all waited, Sameena could bring no word from Musharraf of any development. He was too busy avoiding a nuclear conflict with India to be concerned about Sikander and the numerous other prisoners being processed from all over Afghanistan.



"Get up! Get up!" barked a staff sergeant while striking a stick on the bars of Sikander's cage. It was January 11 and Sikander had just gone back to sleep after performing [fajr](#), when he was roused. By now he was well aware that obedience was his only option. His captors were under few illusions about prisoners being volatile and unpredictable, so he was made to stand upright and carefully brought out of the cage, shackled and manacled before being maneuvered into a chair, to which his restraints were then bound.

"No hair or beards where you're going," said a voice from behind. It was a soldier with a razor and scissors. "Can't risk the lice."

With the shaving over, Sikander was forced to strip and given a full body cavity search. After wincing very briefly at the pain, it took all of Sikander's effort to suppress any further reactions. He had long since learned not to pass comment and, to the extent possible, not to react to any treatment in case it invited more of the same from the sadistically inclined among his captors.

Not all soldiers behaved the same way at Bagram, and Sikander clearly saw differences in ethics and moral values among them. But it was noteworthy that as time passed, a general drift toward more inhuman tendencies became increasingly "normal."

When he was dressed again, tight-fitting goggles were placed over his eyes, with black tape over the glass panes and on the sides, to seal his view of anything around the edges. Over his mouth was placed a surgical mask, and earmuffs sealed off most of his hearing. His hands were wrapped in mittens while the manacles were removed so that they could be reapplied with his hands behind his back. A belly chain was fastened around him and used to link him to a prisoner in front and one behind.

Sikander felt the tug of the chain, and instinctively shuffled forward. After a few faltering steps, sensing a slight breeze on what was left exposed of his face, he judged he was now outside. Suddenly, a firm grip on each elbow arrested his motion and held him still. Something was being written on his forehead with a felt-tipped marker. Finally, a bag seemed to be dropping over his head, leading him once more to a feeling of being imprisoned within himself.

The tugging of the chain resumed, slackening and tightening as he struggled to keep his balance without the usual sensory cues. A hand grabbed him at the elbow, stabilizing him, but continuing to urge him forward.

The engines of the C-141 Starlifter idled with its gaping ramp down as it awaited its human cargo and with all pre-flight inspections complete, Sikander and his fellow detainees were marched carefully up the aircraft's ramp and made to sit on its floor. Webbing straps were passed through everyone's arms, legs, and ankle shackles to hold them in place inside the cavernous twenty-one-meter-long hold of the giant transport. Sikander's limbs started to go numb. Shortly after takeoff, as the aircraft underwent several maneuvers, each was a fresh source of pain in his shoulders, wrists, and hips. The pain subsided once the airplane leveled off at cruise altitude. Fifteen hours later, it landed.

Two months before Sikander's flight, on November 13, 2001, George W. Bush had issued a Presidential Military Order covering the treatment of detainees as illegal enemy combatants, a concept not mentioned in the Geneva Conventions. White House legal counsel went on to advise the president that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to such detainees, even [Taliban](#) detainees who, they argued, came not from a state but from a "failed state." No theory was presented for why such a distinction was important. The November 13 PMO essentially handed the President the right, without recourse to any other authority, to designate, incarcerate, and eliminate anyone as an illegal enemy combatant. The agility it afforded the administration seemed like a worthwhile value in light of most people's resentment of the provision of due process to suspected terrorists.

Added to this was a further theory that the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, though under the control of the United States, was not sovereign American territory, and was therefore beyond U.S. judicial reach. As a result, any detainee believed or declared by presidential order to be an illegal enemy combatant was subject to indefinite detention in a place under U.S. government control but capable of being dealt with in any manner whatsoever, and without legal recourse to challenge such detention or treatment.

Back in 1994, a camp facility was created at the naval base in Guantanamo Bay as part of Operation Sea Signal to house Haitian migrants. At the south side of the base, several camps, beginning with Camp Alpha and then Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Golf, were constructed. When more were built on the north side, the naming began from the other end of the alphabet, beginning with Zebra. The American government decided to establish a large-scale permanent facility for holding and questioning detainees captured in its global war on terror among these camps. As a temporary facility, Camp X-ray was hurriedly prepared while the larger Camp Delta was redesigned for more permanent use. X-ray was to be pressed into service almost immediately, using razor wire and chain-link fencing, with tents for guards and specially constructed modular cells for detainees. Camp Delta was to be made ready by April 2002.

By order of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Southern Command set up two Joint Task Forces. JTF-160 would manage and handle detainees, while JTF-170 would interrogate them. The former was composed largely of military police units while the latter consisted of intelligence-gathering personnel. Together they comprised what was called the Joint Interagency Intelligence Facility at Guantanamo.

By the second week of January 2002, everything was in place for prisoners who had been picked up in Afghanistan and held for questioning at Bagram to be brought to Camp X-ray. Sikander was among the first batch to be transferred. He had plainly failed to convince anyone who mattered that he was not a member of al-Qaeda or the [Taliban](#). He was not difficult to designate. With his money and his English-speaking skills, captured after being shot by Northern Alliance forces, he was almost certainly a high-value suspect and no military officer would risk his career on giving him the benefit of the doubt.

As Sikander and his fellow prisoners were taken off the airplane, he could hardly feel anything. Almost dragged into a waiting vehicle, Sikander

was driven from the airfield to the north side of the sprawling base. He couldn't tell how many other prisoners he was with. When the vehicle came to a halt, he was again hauled, this time in the direction of Camp X-ray's perimeter towards a building. Eventually, the goggles, facemask, earmuffs, and mittens were removed and he took several moments to get used to the light shining brightly in the room into which he had been deposited. The shackles, belly chain, and manacles remained. He looked around and saw that he was among about thirty other people.

"Face the front!" came an order over a loudspeaker, repeated successively in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and finally, [Pashto](#). "Remove all your clothes. You are being prepared for admission into Camp X-ray," The message continued in multiple languages. After it had finished playing, several guards came into the room. Each worked with one prisoner and releasing only a single restraint at a time as needed, enabled his respective charge to undress.

With the undressing complete, one of the guards waved his rifle toward another room to their left, ushering the prisoners into it, while barking out "This is a place where there is no law. We're the law. If you obey our law, you'll be treated well. If not, you'll be punished and dealt with severely!" A fellow officer translated.

Trudging into the room, Sikander was accosted by a powerful chemical smell, possibly a disinfectant as far as he could tell, which gave way to the rush of water over his naked body. After five minutes, the shower was turned off and a guard appeared with thin cotton towels. Sikander was handed one in which to wrap himself. He was then taken to yet another room where one after another he and other detainees were each given a small pile of things to carry. Among them was a vermilion jumpsuit.

As he followed the train of men carrying these items, a soldier called him over, indicating that another body cavity search was to take place. When the search was complete, the soldier gestured toward the jumpsuit.

"Put it on," he commanded as he pointed Sikander toward a cubicle with no door where he assisted Sikander to dress, again, following the usual procedure with the restraints. After putting on the uniform, Sikander was taken to see a physician, who gave him a simple medical examination that included measuring his height and weight, checking for lice, drawing blood, and taking DNA samples. Lastly, a full dental examination was performed. With the admission procedures complete, Sikander was finally led to an isolation cell where he was to stay for thirty days without contact with anyone. Sikander was now firmly under the control of JTF-160's MPs.

With the Geneva Conventions ruled inapplicable by the Bush administration, the MPs of JTF-160 worked with standard operating procedures that were continually evolving. These included starting any internment with thirty days of isolation. By contrast, the Geneva Conventions stipulated that solitary confinement was to be used exclusively for prisoners committing a qualifying infraction.

Alone with his dark thoughts for those seemingly endless days, Sikander learned the nature of solitary confinement and why the Geneva Conventions were so vocal about its use.



Paralysis had become the norm for life in Hayatabad. Sikander's absence had seen to that, and although he could not be forgotten by any means, everyone tried to work through it as best they could. Abdul Majeed and Saleem were introduced to the workings of Javelin and began to help in sales and warehousing. Jamil did an admirable job managing things under the circumstances and got to know both young men. It rankled with him, however, that the two of them had been a part of the cause of the troubles. He would often take them back to the Zarghooni [Masjid](#) to listen to more enlightened [Sunni](#) speakers who were clearly not in the pro-[Taliban](#) camp. Neither did they subscribe to some of the austere, harsh interpretations of [Islam](#) that had come to be associated with the [Taliban](#).

Saleem became particularly interested in the teachings at the [madrassah](#) nearby and quickly acquired a sense of the depth of Islamic knowledge and learning that was possible. He gained new insights into how life could be expressed in much richer terms than the simple lists of "do's and don'ts" characteristic of the [Taliban](#) way of thinking. His mentors instilled in him a stronger focus on having a spiritual core set of beliefs and convictions that could be used to inform behavior. The pursuit of these began to engage him increasingly as time went by.

Seeing such a change in Saleem, and at the encouragement of Fatima, Abdul Majeed followed suit and soon the men began providing opinions about [Islam](#) that resonated with most of the rest of the family's thinking. They could discuss knowledgeably the importance of education to both men and women. They learned about the relative empowerment of women that was originally a cornerstone of [Islam](#) in contrast with many of the pre-Islamic misogynistic tendencies that had resurfaced in much of the Muslim world centuries after the initial spread of [Islam](#). Saleem so excelled in his ability to read and understand the "[tafsir](#)" that he enlisted in a program of learning to become an '[alim](#)'.

By early February, the tensions between India and Pakistan that had flared up at the end of 2001 had subsided to a simmer, much to the relief of a Bush administration that was looking for Pakistan's undivided focus to support its own campaign in Afghanistan. President Musharraf's attention was a little more available to be directed toward other matters.

As the month rolled on, Rabia received no word regarding Sikander. However, on the weekend of February 22, as she and Sofie were watching over the children in the lounge, they heard the slamming of car doors. It was Sameena and Wasim.

"[Ammee](#)! Rabia! I have some news!" called out Sameena.

"What?" asked Rabia anxiously, not daring to hope.

"Rabia, President Musharraf conferred with [Abba-jan](#) and asked for more detail but especially a photograph. The more recent the better."

"I don't have a recent—wait!" Rabia exclaimed, her heart quickening. "I remember him putting on a suit and tie for a company photograph back in August for the Pakistan Day celebrations!"

"Get it," Sameena urged.

"Jamil [bhaj](#)! Jamil [bhaj](#)!" Rabia called. Jamil was in his bedroom.

"Coming!" he yelled, quickly putting on his [qamees](#) before hurrying downstairs.

Rabia struggled to remain calm. "Jamil [bhaj](#), we've been asked to provide a photograph of Sikander." A new radiance came over her. Something concrete was being done. It was only a photo, but it was surely a step in the right direction.

"You have to go to the office and find the staff photograph that Sikander had taken on Pakistan Day. You were in it too, remember?"

"I do remember," Jamil said as he turned to hurry back upstairs. "No need for the office though. It's in my room." The photograph was retrieved and given to Wasim, who assured the family he would do all he could to pursue the matter with President Musharraf.



After the thirty-day period of isolation, Sikander was placed in a modular cell that resembled an open cage. Its walls were constructed of chain-link wire, the top was wood and metal, and the floor was concrete. Offering no privacy, the cage was open to the elements. Indeed, spiders and scorpions were free to come and go. The detainees were each in their own subunit of the overall cage structure and every day, they would be let out for a few minutes of walking exercise. Sikander had occupied the cell for a few days when JTF-170's interrogators got round to him. The same answers about personal details, history, siblings, parents, schooling, and so on were among the many things that Sikander had to repeat. He didn't realize it at the time, but under the joint task force, several different agencies had reasons to interrogate him.

Sikander had really only one thing to hide; Saleem and Abdul Majeed were indeed [Taliban](#) members. He had convinced himself that his captors were interested in hardcore al-Qaeda and [Taliban](#) leadership and not two misguided young men. Neither of them was interested in al-Qaeda's [Salafist](#) views, and they had certainly never harbored animosity to America after their direct experience of American assistance during the Soviet occupation. Their interaction with al-Qaeda had been entirely indirect, through second-hand experiences.

As far as Sikander knew, the [Taliban](#) as a whole had never pursued a rabidly anti-American agenda. To the contrary, the Pakistanis and the Americans had helped them into power. The State Department had been warm toward their ascendancy. It struck Sikander as especially ironic that the [Pashtunwali](#) code and its immutable sense of obligation to protect al-Qaeda leaders as guests had cost the [Taliban](#) their country and turned them into criminals.

But captives such as himself were now considered below the rank of criminal. Being designated neither a lawful combatant nor alleged criminal meant that detainees such as Sikander were to be afforded neither the protections of the Geneva Conventions nor *habeas corpus* rights. It was the system's way of either saying "we're incapable of making mistakes" or else "the wrongful loss of a few people's liberties are worth the rightful preservation of those of the many."

From the authorities' viewpoint, a detainee's behavior in Guantanamo was defined by just two things, namely compliance and cooperation. Compliance meant the complete absence of defiance toward their captors. The mere hint of a failure to comply was grounds for punitive action. If a rule was broken, the offending prisoner was the subject of a beating by the Immediate Reaction Force, or IRF, whose personnel were typically assigned the duty in a roster so that all MPs were given a taste of it. To be "IRF'd" was the dreaded consequence of any failure in compliance. For punishment, MPs would typically engage in a number of styles of physical beatings but very loosely based on the standard operating procedures laid down for such disciplinary interventions. The degree of adherence to these procedures was largely down to the personalities of the individual MPs. Since failure to follow procedures was generally without consequence, those MPs inclined to indulge in sadistic pleasure took advantage of each IRF'ing occasion.

One day, the group of detainees with whom Sikander was out on break was called back in. Sikander took longer than allowed to return to his cage. When he approached it, the IRF arrived in full riot gear. The first MP rushed him with his shield and forced him to the ground. He held Sikander's head. The second and third came down with full force on his arms, and the fourth and fifth each took a leg, beating him and then shackling him. While his legs were pinned to the ground, they lifted up his torso then pushed him hard back down onto the ground. Regaining consciousness, he was made aware of his infraction and warned not to repeat it. It was an easy warning to heed.

In his cage, recovering from his ordeal, Sikander's thoughts drifted back to the numerous times leading up to his arrival in Guantanamo when he might have weighed the risks of escape differently. He began to fantasize about jumping out of the fourth story window from his room in Qunduz. He thought of feigning death and being buried in whatever grave had been used for the ill-fated [Taliban](#) prisoners who had died in the container on the journey from hell. He imagined what it might have been like if he had disguised himself as a medical staffer walking out of the prison hospital in Sheberghan, or if he had snatched at an unwary guard's gun in Bagram.

But of all the things Sikander had imagined up to this point, being captured and taken into custody by American forces had been, in his mind, the most likely to result in reasonable treatment.

Americans! How different these people were from the humane, God-fearing people he'd come to learn about, people who had been of so much help during the Russian occupation. How far this seemed from the open society that his Aunt Zainab's son, Salman, from Durham, North Carolina, had described, with his family vacations, his SUV, and his Yosemite photographs.

As the days passed, Sikander could often hear the cries and screams of fellow inmates after having been subdued by the IRF MPs. It didn't seem to matter if they were in a nonthreatening position; the MPs would do their worst anyway. They would also either withhold or give CIs—comfort items. Flip-flops, more clothing, less clothing—with a minimum being boxer shorts—even board games were handed out to highly compliant prisoners or taken away from less compliant ones.

Achieving compliance was about breaking the detainee spirit. On the positive side, however, the detainees were given [Qur'ans](#) to read and were allowed to pray five times a day and were also allowed to re-grow their facial hair. The [Qur'ans](#) were, generally speaking, treated with respect. Each would be slung inside a facemask and left to hang from the bars of the cage to avoid being defiled by contact with the ground. Sikander did, however, hear of occasions where MPs had abused [Qur'ans](#) in despicable ways.

If being given the IRF treatment for a failure of compliance was bad, the kind of treatment meted out for a failure of cooperation in interrogations was generally worse. In mid-February, not long after the first round of interrogations, Sikander was again taken for questioning. He had been deprived of sleep for the last twenty hours when finally he was brought into a light-filled interrogation room. A male U.S. Army interrogator, a female U.S. Navy interrogator, and two MPs were there.

Captain James A. Mahler, Jr., was the lead interrogator. He had a gaunt face and what remained of his hair after the customary "high-and-tight" cut, capped his head in a short and curly crest. He wore rimless glasses and his thin mouth with barely visible lips betrayed no hint of ever having smiled. Sikander could nonetheless sense that this man had put himself in a state that required discarding some of his own humanity—a state that, among other things, permitted him to operate with a perversion of cause-and-effect as it related to detainees. His logic allowed that mere internment in Guantanamo was its own evidence of guilt. For Mahler, Sikander was yet another personification of al-Qaeda, a bad guy that had to be despised for what his kind had done in New York a few months earlier. He was one of the "worst of the worst." He had to be. He was in Guantanamo.

With Sikander bound to his chair, Mahler didn't offer the usual questions.

"When did you last meet with Shareef?" he began.

Sikander didn't understand the question and supposed he may have misheard Mahler. "I... I didn't hear the question," he said in his sleepy stupor.

Mahler peered over the top of his eyeglasses and made brief eye contact with the two MPs, while uttering the word "down." Sikander immediately felt himself being lifted off the chair by his armpits. The MPs pushed their knees forcefully from behind into his own, causing his legs to buckle until his knees hit the ground. Pinned in place by the MP's knees, his upper body was slammed against the floor. Sikander howled. After a short delay, the entire procedure was repeated until finally he was picked up again and dropped into his chair.

"It will cost you this treatment if you fail to listen to my questions, Mr. [Khan](#)," said Mahler softly. "When did you last meet with Shareef?" he repeated.

"I...have...no...idea... who that is," Sikander replied, grimacing as he gasped out each word.

"Jehangir Mohammed Shareef. He's an al-Kayda coordinator for west Peshawar," replied Mahler.

"Look...truly... I don't know him."

"Okay, how about Qureishi? Atif Masood Qureishi? A lieutenant colonel in the [ISI](#)? When did you last meet with him?"

"[ISI](#)? Sir, I only know one officer from the [ISI](#). I last saw him in Qunduz airport in November before I was injured and captured. He had come from Pakistan to help recover [ISI](#) people who needed to be...to be picked up when Musharraf changed sides..."

Mahler looked across to the Navy woman. She was a lieutenant in her mid-twenties. Sikander noted that in her own way she was beautiful, resembling Nicole Kidman, whom he had seen in several movies in Peshawar. She opened a folder, pulled out a picture, and handed it to Mahler. He examined it briefly before placing it in front of Sikander. As Sikander attempted to focus on it, Mahler resumed his questioning.

"Do you know this man?" he asked. Pictured in a full dress Pakistan Army uniform, the man's face was unmistakable.

"Yes...yes I do. He's the person I mentioned. Junaid. Captain Junaid is what I have always called him."

"Well, you should know he's a lieutenant colonel in the [ISI](#) and his real name is Qureishi. Atif Masood Qureishi," said Mahler. "When did you last see him?"

"As I told you, I left him at the airfield at Qunduz when I went to sell the mules and buy food. He was the one I left my in-laws with. He...he... I've always known him as Junaid."

"Well, he's working for al-Kayda, Mr. [Khan](#). What does that make you? Huh?"

"Al-Qae—I...I don't know what to tell you," pleaded Sikander, weary but alarmed. "He told me he was going to get his people out of Afghanistan and offered to help me get there too. So...so I could get my wife's family across into Pakistan after the war started. He traveled with me, and then split off to recover his people. I went to my wife's village. We met up again near Qunduz and he took charge of the family while I went into the city."

"Now that's more the kind of talking we want from you, Mr. [Khan](#). Lieutenant, see to it that Mr. [Khan](#) gets a toothbrush and flip-flops. When you cooperate we can treat you well," said Mahler.

"But you knew more than I did. How was this helpful?" Sikander was genuinely bewildered.

"Never mind that, Mr. [Khan](#). Now, tell us what you know about planned attacks. Tell us about al-Kayda people already in the United States. Tell us who's in Pakistani training camps. Tell us what they're planning, Mr. [Khan](#)," demanded Mahler. His face grew more intense and his lips tightened as he bent down lower to approach Sikander's eye level. Mahler's ominous expression made breathing difficult for Sikander. Weighing his next utterance, he could come up with nothing that might satisfy his questioner.

"I...I don't have any idea about any plans," Sikander stuttered, as he braced himself for what would come next.

Mahler straightened up and glanced once more at the MPs, again murmuring the word "down." Like a well-choreographed ballet movement, they repeated the routine, bringing Sikander up off his chair and crashing down onto the floor. New agonies piled onto those from his earlier punishment. Sikander screamed and whimpered, certain he would die from the pain. He was lifted and dumped back into the chair.

"Tell us what we want to know, Mr. [Khan](#). Make it easy on yourself," demanded Mahler.

"I don't know! I...don't...know! I've told you what I know!" screamed Sikander, barely able to hold up his head.

Mahler issued a disdainful sigh. "I'm leaving this shit-can. I need a smoke! These guys are leaving with me," he said. Smirking and with his head now close to Sikander's, in a tone of disgust he continued, "I'll be back."

The door closed behind them.

"You really want things to be this ugly?" asked the female officer. "You think we like doing this?" Her face had a business-like pleasantness, as if she might have been making an appointment with a customer. It was difficult to remain focused and these people knew it, thought Sikander. He shook his head without answering. Whatever mental faculties he had left at that moment were absorbed by the thought of Junaid being a member of al-Qaeda. He struggled to remind himself that Mahler's claim might not be true.

Sikander noted the woman's uniform name label. A fleeting smile visited his lips as he considered the irony of being held captive by a woman called Alexander.

"You know, we usually get the information we're looking for. It seems stupid to go through the agony that it must be for you, only to cave in ultimately. Don't you think, Sikander? I mean, why not behave like civilized people? Why get into all this... physical stuff?" said Alexander.

"Huh!" sighed Sikander. "Tell me...tell me what you want me to say..." he asked wearily before screaming, "*Tell me!*"

"Oh, everything you know and nothing that isn't true," she advised, unfazed by his volatility. She approached him more closely and started caressing his hair with her soft hands. Crouching down to whisper into his ear, she said in an alluringly quiet voice, "Tell us everything we want to know, Sikander. We'll show you our...appreciation."

Lingering fragrance from Amouage, worn the previous evening drifted into his nostrils. Sikander recognized it. It was one of Rabia's favorites. The scent made him recall her, and he focused on her image, resisting the urge to react to Alexander. His Muslim sensibilities demanded that he be repulsed by such a move, even though physically she was impossible to ignore. Whatever he felt, he was determined to express neither pleasure nor revulsion.

A few minutes passed when the door opened and Mahler and his MPs reappeared. "Well?" he asked Sikander.

"Captain, I can't tell you what you're asking for," said Sikander. "I simply don't know."

After glancing at Alexander, who gave a barely perceptible headshake, Mahler paused before looking at the MPs and waving his head toward the door. Sikander was returned to his cage. Hurling into it like a sack of potatoes, he struck his head against the far side wire wall. But he was beyond processing pain now. He needed sleep.

When Sikander awoke, still weary, he sat up to rest his back against the cage wall and could see other detainees gazing at him from their own cages. He tried to say something but the pain forced his fingertips to meet his swollen lip, then a cut on his forehead.

"Interrogation?" asked a voice from across the aisle that separated his cage from the adjacent set. It was a young man who spoke English with a

Cockney accent.

Sikander nodded, exhausted.

“Yeah, I’ve had that treatment too, man. Huh! Don’t hold anythin’ back, do they?”

Sikander shook his head. He had little desire and less ability to speak.

“It makes ‘em really pleased if you tell ‘em something. Makes ‘em feel like what they’re doing’s workin’, you know?”

As the morning brightened, Sikander could see the man across the way. He was well built, like Sikander, though perhaps a little shorter. He was wearing a white skullcap and wore his jumpsuit pants well above his ankles, in line with conservative Islamic principles.

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum!](#)” said the man. “I’m Fareed.”

“[Wa ‘alaykum...assalaam,](#)” replied Sikander with barely the energy to get the words out. “I’m... Sikander.”

Sikander leaned his head back against the cage and closed his eyes. He could no longer be sure of that. Who *was* he? The insane stream of events in which he was swimming denied him any footing and he wondered if this was the beginning of a rapid slide toward insanity.

I can’t be the person that left home, went to Afghanistan, trained in Scotland, fought the Russians, and prospered in Peshawar. That’s an imagined fantasy. No! For a terrifying moment, he felt as if he’d always been a detainee. More terrifying still was the glimpse his mind was offering him of the possibility of such feelings lasting for more than just a moment. *No!* He had to remain in control. He *was* Sikander. He had to remain Sikander.

“How long have you been here?” Sikander asked.

“Not sure,” replied Fareed, gazing wistfully skyward. “It wasn’t long after the New York attacks. God! Who would do somethin’ like that, eh? Who would have the balls? Calmly gettin’ on a plane, slittin’ the pilot’s throat, flyin’ it into a building? Man!” He shook his head in disbelief.

“They picked me up and did terrible things to me! Just needed to throttle somebody, anybody. Anyone who looked like they could’ve done somethin’ like that. Competin’ with each other, I bet! See who could get the most revenge. God!”

“You don’t sound like you’re from Afghanistan or Pakistan,” Sikander said.

The young man smiled, though it was barely observable across the shadowy cell. “I’m not. I’m from England. Just north of London actually. I grew up there.”

“Hm. Are you...were you...al-Qaeda? [Taliban](#)?”

Fareed didn’t answer the question. He couldn’t trust Sikander with whatever the truth might have been. He just looked down at the concrete floor of his cage.

“How’d you get to Afghanistan?” probed Sikander.

“I was eight when I came to England with my mum and the rest of the family. We lived in Woodford. I studied pretty well and y’know, I got some pretty decent grades and I was goin’ to university,” explained Fareed.

“Really? Which?” Sikander asked, still fighting the pain of speaking.

“City. City College in London.”

Sikander didn’t let on that he had never heard of it.

“Huh! Computer science,” continued Fareed with a wistful grin. “Didn’t finish the program. I just wanted to get out of England and, y’know, see somethin’ of the world?”

“As a matter of fact,” Sikander said, “I didn’t finish school either.”

“Really? Well, I was in Germany when I was seriously injured in this accident y’see. Struck by a car. Almost died! Well, technically I think I did, y’know, when your heart stops?”

Sikander was fascinated.

Fareed continued. “I dunno; I suppose that’s what turned me to think about [Islam](#). I mean, I wanted to know more so when I came back to England, I started going to this place they’d converted into a [masjid](#) in London.” Fareed adopted a distant look before shrugging. “Huh! I knew a bit about computers so I helped ‘em with their Web site. They liked what I did for ‘em and well, y’know, that made me feel good. So I decided I’d go to Afghanistan. Get some trainin’. I wanted to be in [jihad](#) for [Islam](#).”

“Hmm,” responded Sikander. He could only guess at the kind of hole Fareed might have dug for himself.

“It was right after Bush got in. I went to some camps learnin’ how to use [AK-47s](#) and [RPGs](#). But that was long before the World Trade Center. God, those attacks!”

“Go on,” probed Sikander.

“After the attacks I had to fight didn’t I? I mean, all we saw once the Americans came, was bombs, bombs, and more bloody bombs rainin’ down on us!”

“So how did you land here?”

“Caught in Qunduz.” Fareed shrugged. “Those [haraamzadas](#) held onto me. I’m sure they were well paid for turnin’ anyone over to the Americans.”

As he slowly shook his head, Fareed’s tone in uttering the last word left little doubt he had only resentment for America. Still, he seemed a fellow-in-misery for being picked up in Qunduz. Sikander shared his own story with Fareed, which upset the young man visibly. It was all Sikander could do to calm him down and warn him not to direct his anger toward the prison guards or interrogators, as that might land both of them, but certainly Fareed, into serious trouble and IRF injuries.

Several times over the next few weeks Sikander was hauled back in for questioning. On each occasion Mahler and his MPs repeated the treatment, giving him more names and pictures to which he could react. More often than not Lieutenant Alexander accompanied them and whenever she came, she was left alone with him administering variations of her practiced seduction and sympathy to get Sikander to reveal something new. As usual, Sikander could offer nothing of any al-Qaeda plans, training facilities, or people, and as usual, whenever he was judged to be uncooperative, Mahler would see to it that the MPs got their “exercise.”

Sikander and Fareed periodically talked to each other and the conversations usually boiled down to a damning critique of how the American government had responded to the terrorist attacks. But it helped to pass the time.

“Do you suppose they’ll ever let us out of here?” Fareed asked Sikander a few weeks after they’d met.

“I don’t know, Fareed,” replied Sikander. “I don’t know what has to change for them to do that. That’s the frustrating part about this hell. It feels like you’re groping for the formula. What’s it going to take? What do they want to hear?”

The weeks crept along and the temperature in Guantanamo began climbing. On a hot day in March, as Sikander lay in the sweltering heat, MPs arrived to “escort” him to the interrogation block where Mahler was waiting. Sikander almost welcomed the respite from the heat and humidity that the

interrogation would no doubt provide, while steeling himself for his usual denials. But the questioning on this day took a different approach. Mahler was not interested in his knowledge of other possible al-Qaeda members. He wanted to understand Sikander's own makeup. Perhaps they would learn something about the moment in his life when he went off the rails and use it to understand the pathology of his becoming an al-Qaeda sympathizer, financier, or full-blown operative.

"When you were fighting the Russians, you say you were trained to use Stinger missiles? Where?" Mahler began.

"It was Scotland. We were never told where exactly."

"Scotland? Hm...never been there. How'd you get there?"

"We were taken by the PAF to Qatar and from there in a British C130 Hercules."

"Describe the place."

"Hilly. On a shore...there was an expanse of water to the west...islands across the water with their own hills. The sun set behind those hills. It was a long time ago," replied Sikander.

"What else?"

"We were in a camp with cabins. They took us to the camp in a helicopter from the airfield where the Hercules landed."

"How many of you were there?"

Sikander paused to think, wary of how risky such a pause might be. "Fifteen, maybe twenty of us...no, it *was* fifteen. We were put into five groups of three."

"Remember any names?"

Sikander again thought carefully. "I remember some people, yes," he replied.

After waiting a few seconds Mahler prodded, "Well?"

"There was Irfan who had a brother, uh, Usman," said Sikander, "and there was Abdul Rahman and Saleem, my wife's cousin and brother."

"Where did Irfan and Usman come from?" asked Mahler.

"Khost is what they said. Irfan was killed by the Russians at Arghandab after saving my life," replied Sikander.

"Hmm...touching. And the other guy, Usman?"

"After Arghandab, we brought Usman back with us to our village in Nangarhar. He had nobody. No family. They'd been killed by the Russians much earlier. We...my wife's family, offered him a place to—"

"Where's he now?"

"I don't know, but on one of my trips back to the village a few years ago I was told he was back in Khost. I haven't seen him since I left Afghanistan in 1988."

"What got you interested in fighting against America? After all we'd done to help you beat the Russians, were those attacks a way to repay us? Did you get some religious moment? A call to jeehaad?"

Mahler's tone seemed to lack interest in an answer, but Sikander couldn't be sure. Speaking would probably be better than silence.

"Captain, I've told you. I was never interested in fighting America. It's true I'm a religious person. I believe in God. But it doesn't mean I'm trying to kill everyone who isn't a Muslim."

Sikander's words bounced harmlessly off Mahler. He stood hovering over Sikander's bound form. Speaking in a calm, soft voice, he began again.

"Y'know, Mr. [Khan](#), I've just two more years in this job; two more years of active duty. I used to have this neighbor. Buddy o'mine. Sometimes we'd spend weekends hunting, or working in each other's garage workshops. Sometimes we'd chill out at a local bar. Tony... Tony DeLea." Mahler smiled wistfully. "Only he's no longer a buddy. You see, he was blown to bits on September 11. Take a look at this."

Mahler pulled out his wallet and from it a picture. He held onto a corner and brought it close to Sikander's face.

"See him? He's the one on my right. It was after we'd been duck hunting in Virginia. He left a wonderful wife and a sweet little daughter. Not even twelve yet. See him, Mr. [Khan](#)?"

Sikander nodded, before raising his eyes to meet Mahler's.

"Now...how do you expect me to live with myself if I don't see to it that justice is done? How can I face that girl again? Hm?"

Sikander thought about giving Mahler a philosophical response but knew he'd be risking another beating for "being cute."

"I suppose you have to seek out the ones who did those things, Captain."

"Well, you got that right, Mr. [Khan](#). You got that right. I have to go looking." Mahler's cynical smile changed abruptly into a frown. "So, you going to help me with that? Or getting in my way..." Mahler nearly shouted the last few words, "...by not telling me everything you know?"

Sikander's heart sank. He was back full circle into unanswerable questions. He didn't want the terrible beating again.

"Captain...I...just...just tell me what you need me to say," he whimpered. He couldn't hold himself together. "I don't know what to say. I don't... Oh! Noooh!" Sikander groaned, as without a word, Mahler's eyes met the MPs. Once again he was given the treatment. Mahler turned his back on the scene, as if to disown the MPs' action.

When he could speak again, Sikander had to ask the question that had never left his mind since eternity began, back in the middle of November. "Why!? Why are you *doing* this to me!?"

The MPs were about to repeat the punishment when Mahler's hand shot up to interrupt them. "Mr. [Khan](#)," he replied in mock surprise that the question should even arise, "Why, I'm doing this for my country, for Tony, and for all the other Tonys out there and their families. And I'm doing it because I'm a Christian and I know what you people with your evil religion are trying to do to this world. I'm not going to let you do it. You're not going to blow yourself up killing others with you just so you can go to Candyland and get yourself some virgins!" Mahler nodded to the MPs. The punishment resumed until yet again, Sikander was hurled into his cage in semi-consciousness.

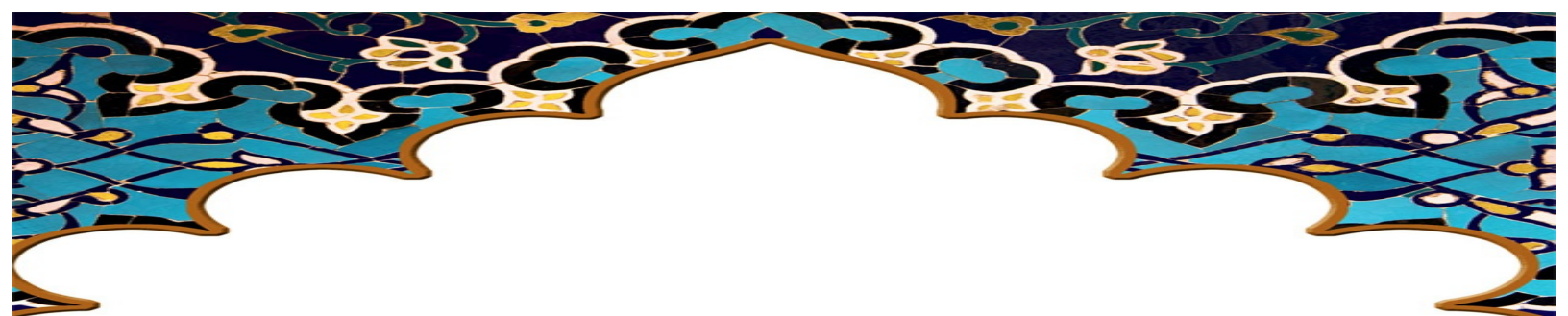
Fareed saw Sikander stir. He looked around before cursing their captors under his breath. "[Haraamzadas](#)!" Barely conscious, Sikander heard the comment, but had neither the energy nor the coherence to agree with him.

Sikander's numerous but unproductive interrogations frustrated Mahler. By now he should have cracked. He couldn't possibly be anyone other than a pro-[Taliban](#) or al-Qaeda terrorist and probably a financier at that, putting on a show. Yet Sikander had given him nothing more than corroboration that he had met Atif Masood Qureishi of the Pakistani [ISI](#). He wondered if Sikander had been specially trained to invite such treatment in readiness to validate the claim of torture, should he ever be released. *That's a game I can certainly oblige him with*, mused Mahler.

On April 28, some three hundred Camp X-ray detainees were told to pick up what few CIs they had and be ready to move into a new facility. Camp Delta was finished, and was to be their “permanent” place of incarceration. They would have enclosed cells. They were transported in a windowless van, in the goggles, earmuffs, manacles, and shackles that denied them any sense of who or what was around them. The remaining detainees were moved the following day.

Camp Delta was much larger than X-ray, to accommodate the swelling numbers of detainees. The banner on the camp’s gate read “Honor Bound to Defend Freedom.” The camp’s perimeter was made of much taller chain-link wire fencing than X-ray’s, earning it the nickname, “The Wire.”

But for Sikander, who had managed to step back from the precipice of insanity and cling to his own identity, there was no mistaking the identity of this place. It was surely “[Jahannam](#)”—a name ingrained into the Muslim psyche as the eternal recompense for a misspent life, from which escape was impossible.



Chapter 17

Family

ALTHOUGH STILL SUSPICIOUS of Sikander, Mahler failed to make any progress in extracting information that could confirm his status as a high-value al-Qaeda detainee. Eventually, however, he was forced to conclude that Sikander was not knowledgeable about anything of significance. Even so, Sikander's innocence was far from proven and for anyone in authority the career risks of freeing him were too great.

The brutally simple connection between behavior and punishment was not lost on Sikander. He learned to become a compliant and cooperative detainee, and even finally admitted that his wife's brother and cousin *had* been [Taliban](#) members, but that they were disillusioned with the movement and had returned to Pakistan with Sikander's in-laws. At least he had convinced himself that it was probably the case given their willingness to depart Afghanistan with the family.

The cells in Delta were austere but they were indoors and more comfortable than X-ray's wire cages had been. Despite this easing in living conditions, Sikander continued to dread interrogations. In contrast with their previously certain harshness, their severity had become unpredictable, which only amplified his anxieties. He found himself marking time in half-day increments and whenever he could, congratulated himself on making it through any half day that passed without interrogation.

Still, in the relative comfort of his present circumstances, he could play games, interact, and eat with fellow detainees, including Fareed, who had toned down some of his volatility.

After spending until late May in the maximum security subcamp 1 of Camp Delta, both Sikander and Fareed had recently been moved into subcamp 4, which was modeled more along the lines of a prisoner-of-war camp.

Sikander was now allowed visits from the International Committee for the Red Cross. By policy, as long as he had been deemed a high-value al-Qaeda affiliate, there was no question of any ICRC visits. During the first such contact he learned that the Red Cross was able to deliver mail on his behalf and, for the first time after almost five months in Guantanamo, Sikander could write to Rabia.

He set about the task at once. Choosing to use English, he judged that his captors would acknowledge his cooperation with their censorship objectives. If they wanted to derive intelligence from it, English would make it easier for them to see that they would be wasting their time.

Dearest Rabia, [Assalaamu 'alaykum!](#)

Rabia, I miss you. I miss you so much, and the children and [Ammee-jan](#), Jamil, Sameena, and everyone else. I miss you all. You are receiving this letter to let you know that I am alive only by the grace of Allah. I am being held in an American camp at Guantanamo and the Americans have the mistaken belief that I have been a member of al-Qaeda or the [Taliban](#). After I left Junaid and the family at Qunduz, my dearest, I was shot in the back but also by the grace of Allah, I recovered from the wound. However, I was captured and handed over to the Americans. I have tried to explain to them that I was never a member of al-Qaeda or the [Taliban](#), but until now they remain unconvinced. Rabia, please find a way of getting me help. Find a lawyer. Do what you can, my love, but please help.

[Wasalaam](#), your life companion and loving husband,

Sikander



It was May. It was hot. It was Peshawar. After the flurry over obtaining a photograph four months earlier, efforts to locate Sikander seemed to have stalled. The family was despondent. Deep down, Sofie was sure that her son was alive, and even though she missed him terribly, her spirit reassured her, connected as she felt it was to his. Noor was likewise sanguine, though more from her confidence in Sikander's resourcefulness. Together they comforted Rabia, who was up and down, sometimes optimistic, at other times consumed by doubt.

Noor had become good friends with Sofie. She was pleased with the changes in Saleem and with his reconnection with Ejaz and Hinna. With a healthy income from Javelin, Saleem and Amina rented a home in another part of Hayatabad. Abdul Majeed and Fatima moved to the north side of the Industrial Estate, closer to Jamrud, not far from Abdul Rahman and Sabiha, who had opened a small convenience store in the market, with money Sofie had loaned them. The business was just getting going and Abdul Rahman was assiduous in paying her back.



On May 14, 2002, gunmen opened fire at an Indian army camp near Jammu in Indian-occupied Kashmir, killing thirty-four people, mostly wives and children of officers. Four days later, Pakistan's ambassador was expelled from India. Two day later still, clashes between India and Pakistan killed six Pakistani soldiers and an Indian soldier, along with civilians on both sides. The following day, Kashmiri separatist leader, Abdul Ghani Lone was assassinated, and on the day after that, India's Prime Minister Vajpayee ordered his troops to prepare for war.

Meanwhile, Musharraf let it be known that he would not rule out the use of a nuclear first strike against India, and that India should not expect a conventional war from Pakistan. From May 24 for the next few days, Pakistan carried out a series of missile tests, while India placed naval vessels off the coast near Karachi.

The situation deteriorated to the point where the United States and other countries asked their non-essential citizens to leave both countries within days. In early June, an Indian unmanned aerial vehicle was shot down inside Pakistan near Lahore. Finally, in mid-June, amid mounting international pressure, Musharraf made an important "gesture" speech pledging to end militant infiltration into India from Pakistan. In response, India moved its warships away from the Karachi coast and tensions wound down. Musharraf's attention was again free to focus on other matters.



The doorbell rang at the [Khan](#) residence. Sofie heard it and asked Jamil to answer, as he was the only male presently at home.

"Yes? What can we do for you?" Jamil asked the unfamiliar figure at the gate.

“Assalaamu ‘alaykum. I’m from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Here’s my business card.” The man handed the card to Jamil and continued. “We have information about a Mr. Sikander [Khan](#) and a letter from him.”

Jamil quickly let the man in and after recovering from his surprise, he called out: “[Ammee!](#) Rabia [bhabhi!](#) Come quickly! News from Sikander [bhai!](#)”

Rabia had been trying to read *Dawn* and watch CNN simultaneously, in the slim hope of learning something that might have any bearing on her husband’s fate. Hearing Jamil, she sprang to her feet and hurried into the lounge with Sofie and Noor close behind.

Desperate to learn something of her husband, Rabia was too excited to sit, but urged the visitor to make himself comfortable. Jamil offered him refreshment. The man in a gray Western-style suit retrieved a pair of black-rimmed reading glasses and a slip of paper from his inside jacket pocket.

“I’m Yusuf Mirza.” he began with a smile, “from the International Committee for the Red Cross. I wanted to let you know that we have located a Mr. Sikander [Khan](#) in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He was—”

“[Ya Allah! Alhamdulillah!](#) I knew!” cried Sofie. Rabia began a whispered prayer of thanks for this good news but a frown quickly took hold at the mention of Guantanamo. Yusuf turned in Rabia’s direction, “Might you be,” he looked down at the paper and back up, “Mrs. Rabia Sikander [Khan?](#)”

Overwhelmed by mixed feelings, she nodded, dumfounded.

“Ah! Good, good. I have information that your husband has been held on suspicion of fighting for al-Qaeda or the [Taliban.](#)”

Rabia’s fingers leapt to her lips. The relief of knowing that Sikander was alive had been cruelly overshadowed. She felt numb and paralyzed, unable to utter anything.

“How is he? When will he be released?” asked Sofie. “I’ve heard that they don’t have to release people from Guantanamo! [Ya Allah!](#) Have mercy!” she pleaded, as she imagined the possible permanence of her son’s incarceration.

“You’re his mother?” Yusuf asked. Sofie nodded. She, too, was hard pressed to speak.

“I recommend you find a lawyer, a U.S. citizen, who can perhaps make a case for Sikander’s release. Please understand, however, that the ICRC doesn’t intervene in these matters. We only make sure that the treatment of prisoners is humane. We have no power to force any change, but we can and do publicize any abuse we may come across,” he explained. “Importantly, however, we’re also able to deliver mail and small packages from family members and I’d be happy to help you with that or answer any questions you have, if I can. But you should know that I’m not the one who meets with Mr. [Khan.](#) That’s the job of my colleagues in the U.S.”

Saddened by the news and the look on her daughter’s face, Noor wept silently. She was filled with thoughts of their harrowing departure from Qunduz. If she could only return to that fateful moment when Sikander had decided to ride off; return and scream warnings into his ear about what lay in store for him if he left them. How far things had unraveled from that small error, all for the price of a few mules and a little food!

Addressing Rabia, Yusuf continued, “I have this letter for you, Mrs. [Khan.](#)” He reached into another pocket, retrieved a sealed envelope and held it out for her. “I can stay if you wish to write a reply, or I can come back if you prefer to have more time.”

Rabia took it silently, staring at it in her hand. It was a piece of him.

Sofie intervened. “Mirza [sahib](#), perhaps it’s better if you come back.”

Returning to the moment, Rabia finally spoke. “[Ammee-jan](#), I...I need to go read this alone.” Sofie nodded sympathetically as Rabia disappeared to her room.

Rabia sat on the edge of her bed. Trembling, she opened the letter, and put it to her nose. She could draw no solace from any scent of her beloved husband. Finally, half daring and half not, she read it, gasping upon learning of Sikander’s being shot. She read it again.

When she was done, Rabia fell back onto her bed. Burying her head in her arm, she cried. *Why? [Ya Allah!](#) Why is this happening to us? If he’d married a respectable girl from Pakistan, he’d never have had this trouble!* After ten minutes, having exhausted her tears, and with whatever composure she could muster, Rabia returned to the lounge.

“Yusuf’s gone.” Sofie said. “He promised to come again tomorrow to pick up your reply for Sikander.” Rabia’s disheveled condition left little doubt as to how she’d reacted to the letter. Satisfied at the very least that Sikander was alive, Sofie decided not to press her for its message just yet. “Rabia, we have to focus on the positive...take heart from this news. At least we know he’s alive and where he is, don’t we? This is a time for us to be strong. It’s one of Allah’s trials. He surely wants us all to make the effort.”

Rabia listened, politely acknowledging Sofie’s effort to raise her morale, but her mind was already ahead of her mother-in-law’s. Developing an idea, she turned to Jamil.

“Jamil [bhaj](#), I know that we got nothing from the photograph, but we know where he is now. Can’t we ask Sameena to get the message to Musharraf? Surely *he* could take it up with the Americans? They’d listen to him wouldn’t they?” Rabia’s tone was more hopeful than confident. “Call her. Ask her to come over as soon as she can.”



With better-developed procedures after their initial improvisations, the new people who interrogated Sikander were usually more humane and, though he didn’t know it at the time, usually from the FBI. They were making their own efforts to connect the dots between people of interest to them in Pakistan and any “sleeping” al-Qaeda operatives in America. A name Sikander had given them was that of his second cousin, Salman [Khan](#) of Durham, North Carolina. He was the only person Sikander knew in the United States.

Whatever the improvements in interrogation treatments, the disciplinary punishments meted out for the slightest infractions remained severe. Sikander had learned the hard way from the early days that it was highly dangerous, for example, to damage or write on a polystyrene cup, being U.S. government property. It always pained him, however, to learn of yet another detainee paying a high price for that kind of lesson. He was likewise aware of the harsh punishments handed out to inmates who were uncooperative in interrogations, and, for that matter, to freshly disoriented newcomers. One particularly galling example was when Fareed lost his clothing privileges and was down to boxer shorts. In his air-conditioned cell he was cold and wrapped himself in his prayer rug. The next day it was taken away from him for having been misused as a blanket.

On a June day, Sikander was walking alone in the hot sun for his exercise break. He could smell the Caribbean air in his lungs and life in “[Jahannam](#)” felt bearable. Dragging his feet, despite the heat that perhaps others might not bear, and the pain on his ankles from having worn shackles too often, Sikander felt what some would call, inner peace. His near loss of identity had provided him clarity on what was truly important to him, and in its own

ironic way, in this place of captivity, released and surfaced his soul.

If he couldn't have material prosperity, he could value family relationships. If he couldn't have family relationships, he could value personal liberty. If he couldn't have personal liberty, then perhaps he could value human dignity. And if, in captivity, there was to be no human dignity, then maybe self-respect, and if not even self-respect, then at least self-awareness, the very seat of his soul. He was who he was and it didn't matter if he lived or died, he wouldn't lose that, however hard "they" might try to dispossess him of it.

Over the past six months he had lost all but the last of these things, and came near to losing that too. Their absence from his life had provided the best evidence of their worth and the least of these had been material prosperity. He also understood that his essential self amounted to no more and no less than the sum of his values and the behavior toward which they guided him. That would be just as true if he perished in Guantanamo as it would be if he were ever to return to his family in Peshawar.

Sikander's perspective also gave him new insights into his captors. He saw them as people trapped in their own circumstances. By now he had come across several guards who were genuinely nice people with integrity and honor. Some of them were forced to behave in ways that clearly went against their own values and natural inclinations. They could be distinguished from the more sadistic, zealous ones, and perhaps worse still, from those who had arrived as principled humane people, but found the permissive environment too severe a temptation, succumbing as they eventually did, to new norms of inflicting wanton hardship and cruelty upon the detainees.

All this was, of course, contrary to the lofty ideals of humane treatment codified in numerous memoranda and operating manuals. But such documents mattered little as long as misbehavior toward detainees remained without consequence.

Sikander felt concern for such people. In his mind their situation formed a more cruel prison for their spirits than anything they could fashion to confine him. Unlike him, they had lost themselves, denied even the awareness of their own spiritual annihilation. The luckiest of them might avoid that fate and would be left searching for ways to repair their souls. In any case, it would probably be long after he had either departed this place or died there. With more empathy than disdain, he wished them luck.

The exercise walk was finally called to a close and Sikander returned quickly to his cellblock. The rest of the morning was spent reading a dog-eared copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had been brought to him on the trolley cart euphemistically known as the "library." At lunchtime he joined Fareed in the dining hall.

Sikander and Fareed had befriended some other inmates, with whom they'd built a good rapport, sharing their ability to speak [Pashto](#), English, and Urdu. Sikander had by now also picked up a smattering of Arabic. Like the vast majority of non-Arab Muslim children, he had learned how to recite the [Qur'an's](#) Arabic, but without understanding it. He often pondered the irony that his longstanding wish to grasp the original language of the [Qur'an](#), was being fulfilled, albeit partially, in this, of all places.

Although Fareed had become much more sedate and cooperative with authorities, he could always find something to complain about. Today it was the food. Pushing away his tray in disgust, he leaned in toward Sikander.

"Dunno how you can eat this crap!"

"It isn't that bad Fareed. Seems to keep you in good enough—"

Sikander's attention shifted to the dining hall's double doors that had swung open. A guard came through them and called out, "Sikander [Khan](#)!"

Without delay, Sikander stood up and raised his arm. "Yes!" he called out. His spirits sank. *Another interrogation.*

"This way!" said the guard. Sikander glanced at Fareed—who wore a combined look of dismay, apprehension, and sympathy—before following the guard out of the dining hall. When, however, he was led past his own cellblock into another, previously unvisited building, his concern multiplied. This was not normal. Anything not normal usually resulted in pain. His heart pounded.

The guard opened the door, ushering Sikander in. Once inside, they stopped.

"Hold out your hands," commanded the guard. Trembling, Sikander complied.

"Put these on," said another guard as he held out a neat stack of clothes; a short-sleeved shirt, a pair of pants, and a pair of socks, on top of which was perched a pair of slip-on canvas shoes. The guard gestured toward a small windowless office indicating the place where Sikander was to change.

"Why? What's going on?" Sikander took the risk of asking, his gaze fixed on the two soldiers in front of him.

"Please put them on, Mr. [Khan](#)." The soothing female voice came from behind the half-open door. Sikander hadn't looked in her direction when walking into the room. "You're going home."

You're—going—home. Three simple words that, at first, refused to register. But when finally he was past being arrested by them, he was gripped by suspicion. *A trick. Trying to weaken me.* He turned to face the woman.

She was attractive. After her eyes, a crimson velvet bow on her straw-colored hair tied in a ponytail, drew his attention. She carried herself with poise, and in her prim gray tailored suit with crimson camisole and matching shoes, she would have been more at home in a Wall Street lobby than handling a detainee release process. Improbably deferential, she smiled at Sikander with an innocence that had no place here.

Look at her. For all his inner peace, at this moment Sikander found this young, attractive woman more annoying than he had ever imagined anyone might cause him to feel. It wasn't her fault she was being so incongruously pleasant. That was probably just her nature. But her smile underscored her detachment from the kind of lives being led just a few meters away. *She has no idea... No, she has to know. How could she not know?*

Her cheerful mood seemed grotesque. It transformed her, in Sikander's mind, into a metaphor for the American public, people known for their love of liberty, but now either oblivious of what was going on in their name in Guantanamo, or too afraid to intervene against the actions of their government.

Beaming, the woman offered her right hand. "I'm Dianne. Dianne Drummond. I'm from the State Department and I'm here with Department of Defense orders that authorize your release."

As he permitted himself only the hint of belief, Sikander was shocked at the anger coursing through him. The silent rage he had fearfully accumulated throughout his captivity, seemed now to want to stand up, be acknowledged, and burst out of him. It took all his energy, aided by fear, raw, lingering fear, to maintain his composure. He said nothing, but with lips quivering, his gaze descended to the soft, slender hand. Without taking it, his eyes slowly returned to meet hers.

Clearing her throat, Dianne lowered the hand, redirecting it to gesture toward the previously identified office where Sikander was to change into his new clothes. He took the clothes from the soldier and went inside the office, emerging, still dazed but transformed, a few minutes later. Sensing his condition, Dianne motioned to the soldiers to wait outside. She offered Sikander a seat and now, with a slightly more serious look on her face, she pulled some papers out of her briefcase.

"Mr. [Khan](#), President Musharraf has intervened on your behalf and confirmed that you are not a combatant but the owner of a bona fide business in Peshawar with no record of plotting or acting against the U.S. government. When you were brought here, your suspected al-Qaeda status meant that your

family was not informed. But after the Red Cross conveyed your letter, we got word from President Musharraf about you. Once we were certain it was you he was referring to we set up the release process.”

“So what’s to be done? Where do I go from here?”

“After I complete this paperwork, which also requires your signature, a State Department jet will take you to Peshawar!”

Elation was pressing into every fiber of Sikander’s being yet he still didn’t dare believe what was happening. With all the restraint he could muster, he cautiously opened up.

“About the handshake, I… I’m sorry,” he said. “Muslim men aren’t supposed to touch a woman they aren’t married to.”

“Please. Don’t give it another thought. I respect your beliefs, Mr. [Khan](#), and I’m sorry I wasn’t better informed before I offered you my hand.”

“Is it possible for me to say farewell [salaams](#) to some of the other men?”

“I’m afraid not,” she replied with a note of sympathy. “As you’ve now been officially taken out of their controlled space, you’re not allowed back in. Besides, they’re only allowed communication by mail through the Red Cross with their families.”

The irony was laughable. He was to be barred from a place where he had been forcibly kept for the past five months. Still, not saying farewells to fellow inmates was a small price to pay for gaining freedom. They’d understand.

Dianne wrote on the papers and held one of them out for him together with her pen. The language was simple enough, asking the signatory’s acceptance of release, affirmation of identity, and an oath against engaging in terrorist acts. Sikander didn’t hesitate to sign. She returned the papers to her briefcase and stood up.

“Please wait here for me. I have to present these papers to the folks at JTF-160 HQ. It might be a while,” she said. Ninety minutes later, she was back, accompanied by an MP.

With the MP leading the way, Sikander and Dianne walked outside.

Outside. It was a notion from which Sikander was thoroughly estranged. Since November, Sikander had been “inside.”

Parked nearby was a shiny black Chevy Suburban. Dianne ushered him into the middle row seat. The MP followed him, and she sat in front, next to the driver. They drove up to Camp Delta’s barrier and after the appropriate credentials had been presented, were on their way to the airfield. Sikander had left the Wire.

Following a short clearance at the airfield’s main entry gate, the vehicle came alongside a gleaming white Gulfstream IV. A Department of State seal was proudly displayed near the open door’s unfolded steps. Fueled and checked out, the aircraft was ready for departure.

The MP stepped out and opened the door for Dianne before doing the same for Sikander. Another official-looking civilian who had been standing near the airplane’s steps introduced himself to Sikander as Lee Carver, staff assistant to Dianne. Carver had arranged the trip, from the aircraft to the clothing, the meals en route, and the meet-and-greet in Peshawar.

When Lee, Dianne, and Sikander, together with a flight attendant, and the two-man crew were aboard, the attendant closed the door. The accompanying change of atmosphere within the cabin as all sound from outside was instantly muted, boosted Sikander’s sense of really departing this terrible place. Nevertheless, conditioned as he was for surprises and not ready to give up on the possibility of a twist to come, he wondered if it was real. Could he dare believe that his ordeal was over? Had he really left the Wire?

He refocused on his surroundings, a welcome distraction from his anxieties. Four sumptuous seats, two pairs facing each other, behind which was a long couch formed the seating area. Between the seats and the cockpit was a small galley and in the rear was a door to what Sikander guessed was a lavatory. Rich wood and leather finishes were in abundance in sharp contrast with the ubiquitous austerity of the last several months.

The engines came to life, their muffled sounds barely reaching the cabin. *Any moment now*, he thought. His mind filled once again with expectation and dread. Dashed hopes were a powerful way to break a spirit. *Any moment now.* The engines would wind down and the charade would be over. *Any moment now!* An interrogator would open the door, burst in, and repeat those unanswerable questions. It might even be Dianne, or Lee. But then again, he thought, the plane might circle Guantanamo for an hour or two with them expecting him to lower his guard and let slip some information. Then he’d be sent back to languish in his cell once more. They might try any of these things, but he’d be damned if they would surprise him. He would be ready for them.

Dianne cast a sympathetic stare at Sikander. He was disoriented. He needed time to catch up with events and the journey would help him begin the process.

A steady breeze flowed from the east, so Runway 10 was to be used. The airplane taxied to the runway threshold and lined up for takeoff. The tower clearance was given and in less than a minute, the jet was aloft and heading east.

As it climbed steeply, Sikander took in the view from the large elliptical window next to him. He marveled at how a place of such agony could be so beautiful, as the Gulfstream passed over the narrow inlet that formed the opening of Guantanamo Bay. Once they were over the other side, wooded hills sprawled beneath them, while the afternoon sun shimmered off the sea. Between the hills and the southern coastline, Camp Delta came into view. Sikander found it jarring. A wave of guilt came over him. He was leaving, but for his fellow inmates down below, already rendered obscure by altitude, the endless night of despair would continue.

Seeing the scale of Camp Delta, Sikander wondered how many detainees were there. How many might be dangerous terrorists posing a threat to the United States? Many, surely? It might have been his way of easing his guilt about being released, but he imagined at least some bad people were there. People who would be prepared to kill out of some crazed sense of religiosity.

As the camp disappeared from view, the Gulfstream pressed on, gaining altitude, before turning onto its final northerly heading. At the same time, Sikander found it easier to dismiss thoughts of his, or anyone else’s detention. He didn’t deserve to be there. That much he knew, and that was surely enough.

“Mr. [Khan](#), may I call you Sikander?” Dianne asked. Sikander nodded. “Sikander, then,” she said. “Perhaps some tea or coffee? Or maybe you’d like to sleep?”

“Sleep. Yes, sleep.”

Lee asked the flight attendant to bring some blankets. Sikander lay down on the long couch behind the cluster of four seats and dozed off.

The flight routed off the eastern seaboard of the United States before making a descent into Halifax Shearwater airport in Nova Scotia. Sikander awoke as the aircraft descended. He had slept deeply. Unable to permit itself such a luxury in all these months in captivity, his body would now avidly consume all the sleep it could get.

Refueling took forty minutes. A fully fueled Gulfstream IV was good for seven thousand kilometers, including reserves. The Atlantic crossing would require a full load. As the day drew to a close, the sleek jet took off once again, a gleaming orange streak reflecting the sunset.

They were bound for Baginton, a small civilian airport near Coventry, England. On this leg of the flight, everyone slept. With his extra sleep before the Halifax stopover, Sikander awoke earlier than the others. Silently he brooded, replaying the last seven months in his mind as he stared out of the window to witness the thin but growing line of orange and blue heralding a new day. With it came an elevated confidence. With so much already behind him this was surely no charade. He was going home. As daylight quickly brushed away the night, they were soon making landfall over Stranraer, in Scotland's Rhinn of Galloway peninsula. The June morning illuminated the land beneath them through the broken cloud cover. At seven in the morning, the jet began its descent.

Having had too little sleep, Sikander's companions didn't do much talking as the aircraft came into Coventry. It taxied to just outside a small hangar for refueling. Clearances had already been established by the State Department, so everyone stepped out of the plane and walked to a comfortable waiting area where they spent an hour between dozing, browsing magazines, and drinking plenty of espresso. Sikander began imagining his welcome home and felt the urge to rehearse his reaction to it. As his fellow travelers grew more alert and awake, he decided to engage them.

"So, where next?" Sikander asked Dianne. Her glance transferred the question to Lee.

"We'll be stopping in Amman and then Peshawar." Lee answered.

"When do we get there?"

"Early tomorrow morning, right around sunrise."

Dawn in Peshawar. Filled once more with anticipation, Sikander recalled its sights, sounds, and smells as vividly as if he was already immersed in them.

There was a further hour's delay awaiting the arrival of a replacement crew from London but with fresh departure clearances for the next leg, they re-boarded and were airborne by ten thirty. After the airplane had leveled off, Dianne came to sit beside Sikander and from her briefcase retrieved a folder. She studied one of its contents quietly before speaking with him.

"Sikander, we traced your capture back to a Dr. Atiq Mohammed in Kunduz, and he confirmed your story of being shot and his treating you for that wound. It also confirms what I told you in Gitmo about President Musharraf's intervention."

"No different from what I explained to anyone who ever interrogated me," replied Sikander, with a cynical shrug.

"Yes, you...um...didn't say that your were actually *with* the [ISI](#). Why not?"

Sikander paused. He didn't want to risk being returned to Guantanamo. Not under any circumstance, but particularly not when he was this close to seeing his family. Perhaps Musharraf had asserted that Sikander was with the [ISI](#) and that had been important in his persuasion of the U.S. government. He elected to be inscrutable. "I was only asked about being a [Taliban](#) or al-Qaeda member and my interrogators seemed disinterested in much else."

"It's okay, Sikander. We're taking you home and you don't have to be concerned," Dianne assured him. "See this? This is a letter for you. It's sealed with a U.S. State Department seal. Keep it that way. If you ever intend to come to America, you'll need to deliver it along with everything else you send for your visa."

Sikander took the envelope from her. Having no jacket, he folded it and put it in his hip pocket. He didn't want to talk. He wanted to think about what Dianne had just told him, but was prevented from doing so by her next remark.

"When we land, we'll give you a few other documents, but before you leave us, we...we'd like you to consider providing us with intelligence."

"What...kind of intelligence?" Sikander asked, his mouth agape.

"We know Peshawar is a hotbed of [Taliban](#) sentiment and al-Qaeda members and sympathizers. We've spent a lot of time, trouble, money, and even people's lives—on both sides, I might add—securing Afghanistan against the [Taliban](#) and their support for al-Qaeda. We need people in your position to let us know if you hear anything, see people, say, with an Arab background, or foreigners, maybe buying suspicious items or behaving unexpectedly. You claim to be against these organizations. Wouldn't this be a good way to prove it?" A plaintive wrinkle dressed her brow.

Sikander thought for a moment. *She's being clever.* He certainly had no love for al-Qaeda and yes, he had professed a concern for the misguidedness of the [Taliban](#). If he reported on such things, he could manage it in his conscience. And yet, he detested the thought of helping America after what had happened to him. However, on this aircraft, on his way to a freedom still under their control, this was neither the time nor place to be forswearing the possibility of cooperation. It would be tactically wise to accept the notion, but he decided to offer at least token resistance.

"Miss Drummond," he began.

"Mrs. Drummond. I'm widowed, but you can call me Dianne."

"Yes uh, Dianne," Sikander began again, absorbing a ripple of sympathy, "as you've just noted, I was captured and delivered to your people for being a non-Afghan. You didn't, however, mention that they paid money for me. I didn't try to escape from my initial captors. I had imagined it would be better to be delivered to Americans than to Dostum or his cronies. At each step I put off thoughts of escape, expecting better treatment once I was among American soldiers. I was taken against my will to Guantanamo where I was...tortured..." He heaved, as the solitary word consumed a lungful of air to prepare, and another to utter. "I was beaten by your people. It's good that the error was recognized after almost seven months of hell but why...why wouldn't I just wish to go back to my life and try to forget what you...your people...have done to me?"

In her most sympathetic voice, Diane replied, "What can I say? We're genuinely regretful of your treatment. We know your government's trying to help ours despite popular opposition, but you surely know more attacks on the United States won't go unanswered. Don't you want to help avoid such killing?"

Her gaze was mesmerizing. Sikander couldn't deny her physical appeal and her personality was by every measure radiant. But for the draining experience of Guantanamo, Sikander was a man in his prime. He was aware he needed to resist her and to resist staring at her, or scanning her shapely form, but the effort was tiring. Unable to meet her gaze for long, he cast his eyes down, and after a pause, gave a grudging nod. "What would I have to do? How would we communicate?"

"You'll need to contact a person at this number in the American Embassy. Please don't share this number with anyone." Dianne handed him a business card for a company called Pakswitch Limited identifying a managing director by the name of Azam Shah.

"After the city code, dial every second digit and then start back from the beginning with the digits you missed, and you'll actually be calling a dedicated line at our embassy in Islamabad. That line routes automatically to Washington. Your handler will pick it up there. Anyone dialing the number as it's written will get a busy signal."

Impressed by such a simple tactic, Sikander put the card in his shirt pocket. "I'll...consider it," he said, leaning back in his seat to take in the moment. His once beloved America was asking him for help in the immediate aftermath of treating him despicably. Such a notion couldn't have been further from the [badal](#) he'd grown accustomed to in Afghanistan. He was, of course, under no illusion that he'd make the difference between success and failure in America's war. But the notion of being needed was interesting.

The day moved along at a fast clip. The sun was low by the time they soared over Istanbul, and it was almost dark under grey rainclouds upon reaching Amman. Taxiing through pouring rain, the jet parked near the VIP lounge, a facility in its own building. Armed with umbrellas from the Gulfstream's closet, the travelers disembarked, stepping briskly into the lounge.

It was a study in opulence. Warm lights were recessed around the edges of Rojo Alicante marble floors. From there, each light bathed its own area of bush-hammered limestone brick wall, its grazing angle teasing shadows out of the naturally undulating stone surface. Persian rugs lay over the marble and were surrounded by seemingly never-used cream leather sofas. A pampering level of service, with cold cuts, sandwiches, hot and cold drinks, and pastries constantly being served on sparkling silver trays, completed the experience.

The Americans certainly have friends in Jordan. Sikander mused. A couple of hours after landing, having refueled and with night drawing on, they departed once more on the last leg to Peshawar.

Four hours later, the aircraft began its last descent. As his sensitive stomach picked up the subtle cues of the drop in altitude, the reality of his release felt complete. Sikander wondered who would be there to meet him. No one was likely to be interested in advertising an American government error, he reasoned. It would surely be a low-key affair. The jet landed.

At four-thirty in the morning, the day was taking shape. The travelers took a moment to clean up before the door was finally opened and Sikander, Dianne, and Lee stepped out into the early morning Peshawar air.

The birdsong was raucous. A faint aroma of bougainvillea was apparent but mixed with kerosene smells from the Gulfstream's engines. As they proceeded away from the jet, the bougainvillea took charge. It was a scent that Sikander hadn't experienced in a long time. Other aromas from morning street hawkers' preparations of chickpea curry, [nihari](#), warm [naan](#) breads, and semolina [halwa](#), enveloped him. Their welcoming greeting brought a flood of memories of the hometown that had not long ago seemed to Sikander, in the depths of his despair to be either never, or forever, in his past. He was back now. Seven months late, but back.

The three of them had not walked far when Sikander noticed two fair-skinned men in dark suits a short distance in front of them. He supposed them to be embassy staffers, a conclusion assisted by a black Chevy Suburban with dark tinted windows immediately behind them. But to his great surprise, several meters to their left stood a solitary figure. It was Junaid—or Atif Qureishi, depending on who was to be believed.

Sikander relented to the unwelcome recollection of an interrogation months earlier. He couldn't help seeing Junaid in a different way. He no longer knew who this man was, but as the doubts rolled around in his mind, he recalled that Junaid's behavior had been honorable at all times and the only source of his suspicion had been his tormentor in Guantanamo. Indicating his need, Sikander peeled away from Dianne and Lee. Had Junaid simply been a Pakistani [ISI](#) officer here to welcome back a fellow officer from a long absence it would have been one thing. But these two men had last seen each other expecting to reunite in four hours—four hours that had turned into eternity.

"Sikander! [Bhai](#)! I'm sorry! So sorry for what you've been through, friend. It must have been an awful, terrible nightmare." Junaid's voice quivered.

"Junaid! Junaid, I...I..." Words overcrowded Sikander's mind, too many to pass through the narrow opening of his consciousness. His lips could assist none to escape, but his arms were willing and he put them to good use, engulfing his friend of sixteen years with a warm hug.

When he was done, he turned to face his two traveling companions who had by now joined their colleagues by the Suburban. He approached them, wiping his face into a more presentable condition. Lee quietly shook his hand, and gave an acknowledging nod before entering the vehicle together with the two staffers. Dianne remained standing. Sikander could see the emotion of the moment had not been lost on her and much of the effort of applying makeup inside the airplane had gone to waste as she dabbed at her nose and eyes with a pocket Kleenex hastily retrieved from her handbag. He met her gaze, understanding in that moment that regardless of any warmth she might have fabricated out of duty throughout their brief encounter, she was a genuinely warm person.

"Dianne, I'm sorry."

"Sorry Sikander? For what?" she sniffled in genuine surprise.

"I was cold and behaved badly to you when we met, while all along you've tried to do your job—and I must tell you that you do it very well. I shouldn't have taken out my anger with your military colleagues on you. I was just filled with so much of it I couldn't...well, I can't say I'll ever forgive what they..." Sikander shrugged. "Still, that's no excuse to—"

"It's okay!" Dianne's velvet voice assured him. Quickly repairing her mildly dented composure, she continued. "There are all kinds of people everywhere. Afghans, Pakistanis, Americans...and I...well, each of us is different. Go now." Perhaps by peering into Sikander's soul for a few hours, she had seen the monumental mistake her government had made. Perhaps the thought of him returning to *his* family reminded her of the tragic loss of her own in a car accident. She couldn't say. But the thought prompted a fresh urging from her.

"Go to your family, Sikander. And welcome back to your country! I hope one day maybe you'll get to experience the country that I love...[inshaAllah](#)." With that, a fragile smile, and the words, "[Allah Hafiz](#)," she joined Lee and the others to begin their journey back to Islamabad, and to be debriefed about getting Sikander's agreement to provide intelligence.

Sikander and Junaid walked back through the airport to Junaid's car. They were on their way home, where a large family gathering awaited him. Sikander wasn't ready to discuss with Junaid the matter of his identity. Instead, he expended considerable energy failing to relax as the vehicle wound its way through the streets, drawing ever closer to Hayatabad. Junaid gave him a short description of their journey home from Qunduz and the harrowing months since.

The air in Sikander's home had been electric ever since Sameena's message about President Musharraf's quiet intervention had reached Sofie and Rabia. It had been a week now since they heard that all necessary steps were being taken to secure Sikander's release, and when it was clear he'd be arriving on the upcoming Saturday, elation turned into outright euphoria.

With preparations at the house akin to those for a society wedding, beautifully colored lights were strung in swags over the exterior walls and over the large black metal gates, giving the place a festive feel. Even in daylight, the lights were stunning.

Sameena and Wasim with their daughter, Rukhsana had come; likewise, Ejaz and Hinna with Adam, Azhar, and Riffat; Saleem and Amina; Abdul Rahman and Sabiha with Sadiq and Sohail; Abdul Majeed and Fatima with young Latifa, the little traveler who had come back in the airlift from Qunduz. It was down to poor Atiya to supervise all the children, while the three matriarchs—Sofie, Noor, and Razya—oversaw the family.

Amid the welcoming mayhem in a household that had lived in quiet dread of the worst news for half a year was Rabia, who was at that time, of all times, in her bedroom, at once delighted and yet deeply pensive.

What will the experience have done to him? Rabia wondered. Would she be getting back the same man she had grown to love? The father of her

children? As questions threatened, another part of her demanded to take control, insisting that such questions didn't matter. If they could just get back together and start rebuilding their lives, everything would be fine. They would get through this. It had been a long, hellish ordeal and now that they would be together again, they would get through it. A determined woman, Rabia would be his source of strength, and he hers. They would scale the rest of the mountain of their life to reach its summit together.

Deep in such thoughts, Rabia continued with readying herself. The honking of a car horn from outside interrupted the hubbub downstairs. Pandemonium ensued, as everyone wanted to be the one to open the newly painted gates.

The family had been told to expect Junaid and Sikander for breakfast and it was now six in the morning. No one had returned to sleep after [fajr](#) out of sheer excitement. The nonresident family members had arrived the day or evening before to be sure they would be present when Sikander arrived, so blankets and bedding were all over the house as people had slept on beds, sofas, and the floors, in accordance with their relative standing in the family hierarchy.

The car drove through the gates and stopped. When Sikander stepped out, a loud cheer rang out and everyone mobbed him. There were plenty of floral garlands that tradition demanded be laid around Sikander's neck. Sofie approached him with hers, put it on him, and enveloped him, as she wept for her son's safe return.

As the mob inched from the patio through the doorway into the house, Noor was next. Unable to contain the blame she had chosen to own for having left him behind in Qunduz, she erupted. "Sikander, I'm sorry you had to endure...[zwey](#)! We couldn't do anything! We were forced to leave you there. My poor—" Noor's regrets were trampled by her joy as her eyes were drawn to Rabia's solitary figure on the upstairs landing.

Rabia descended the steps and with everyone now gazing upon her, the hubbub evaporated as Sikander and Rabia held a mutual stare. From behind Rabia, nine-year-old Ayub came running. Puncturing the silence with a joyful shriek of "[Abba-jee](#)!" he ran up to his father and wrapped his arms around him. Close behind came Qayyum.

"Ayub! Qayyum! Just look at you! Grown so much, [mashAllah](#)!" Sikander tried picking up both of them. His strength wasn't what it should have been, and his difficulty elicited gasps from Sofie and Rabia. With determination, however, he completed the task. Rabia was likewise taken aback by Sikander's loss of weight. He was a pale reflection of the man she had last seen leaving for Afghanistan in October.

Gently lowering his children to the floor, Sikander returned his gaze to their mother. Rabia had a shy smile on her face. With all these family members present, it would have been inappropriate for her to leap upon her husband and profess her sorrow at his absence, her immense relief at his return, and her boundless love. In such company, everything would have to be accomplished with looks given and taken between each of them. But having lived in this society for as long as they had, even elaborate communication was possible with just the eyes.

His spoke of the torment, the terrible times, the pain and suffering, the despair, and the moments of inner peace. They also spoke of the love that had survived unchanged, fueled as it was by the anticipation of eventual reunion.

Hers spoke of the anguish of not knowing his whereabouts or even whether he'd been alive or dead, and of living like a widow. They spoke of her love for him, of the relief of learning that he was alive, and of the hope upon hope for some way, any way, of getting him back.

The day was tumultuous. Sikander enjoyed the company of his relatives and friends. But from time to time, he couldn't help recalling the torment that his fellow inmates were still feeling. As the festivities carried on, his mind seemed able to transform the happy shrieks of the children into his own screams, blurring his recent past with the present. At such times, he stroked his temple before resurfacing into the present and the festivity.

Sofie and Rabia noticed these moments. On one occasion they instinctively exchanged glances, understanding that much work lay in front of them if, now that they had recovered him physically, they were to succeed in getting him back mentally.

When nightfall came he went to bed with Rabia. There was much that he wanted to say and do, but he was too tired to remain awake after his long flight and the intense day that had followed. Besides, with such a comfortable bed, he couldn't avoid drifting off into a much-needed sleep.

About an hour and a half before [fajr](#), Rabia stirred awake to the sound of gasping and moaning, "Uuuuhh! No! No!"

The sound grew more forceful until it broke through from beneath Sikander's consciousness into a full-blown scream. In the next room, Ayub and Qayyum were already awake, crying from having heard the monstrous noises. Again, Sikander screamed "No! NO! Aaaaaghhhh!"

"Wake up! Wake up Sikander!" pleaded Rabia, shaking him gently, then more vigorously.

Sikander awoke, breathing heavily, as if he'd been sprinting. "Oh..." he gasped as he became aware of his wife, his bedroom, and finally, his nightmare. Although he had left Camp X-ray and Camp Delta, they were unwilling to leave him just yet. A cruelly creative subconscious had rendered the experiences of Guantanamo, Bagram, and the ghosts from his ride to Sheberghan in hideously embellished caricature. He gripped Rabia tightly. He would do absolutely anything to avoid losing what he now had back in his possession.

"Sorry," he offered.

She ran her fingers through the wavy mane of hair that he had permitted to grow prior to being whisked away from Guantanamo. Rabia's soothing did nothing to prevent Sikander from recognizing what his ordeal had done to him. Hearing the children, they both arose and went to comfort them. As they stood with the boys, the family was silhouetted against a nightlight near the children's bed.

From the master suite over the front of the house Sofie stood watching the north wing across the courtyard. She had slept only lightly that night and had stirred at the muffled sounds coming from the other side of the house. She was looking at one branch of the generation to follow her and could see the love that was present in that room. It made her feel happy for the future, yet sad that she was on this part of the family's journey and her path to her twilight years without her husband. Her son was back, though. And right now, that was all that mattered.



Chapter 18

Carolina

SIKANDER'S NIGHTMARES CONTINUED. After almost six months in Rabia's insistence, he consulted a doctor who prescribed behavioral therapy and antidepressants. The medications made a difference and by the start of 2003, the episodes had decreased substantially. Sikander had done a lot of introspection during and after his now seemingly short captivity. It was as if he'd been presented a mirror to his own soul and it had helped him in ordering his life's priorities. Now, despite inheriting his father's enjoyment of running a business, unlike his father, he wouldn't let it engross him to a level that would risk his neglecting family.

Rabia was expecting their third child and, uncharacteristically for a Peshawar husband, Sikander fussed over her whenever he could, often forcing her to rest while he handled simple tasks like taking the children to school or shopping.

Sikander's transformation from his time in Guantanamo had found a parallel in the one experienced by his in-laws from Afghanistan. No longer were they village dwellers of Laghar Juy. They lived in or near some of the priciest suburbs of Peshawar. But entrenched villager habits were amusingly incongruent within their modern living circumstances. Noor and Razya had always cooked in a crouching position on their low [patthras](#), but that was discarded now in favor of stand-up stoves and sinks in a modern kitchen. Going to the bathroom was a similar study in contrasts. Rabia had experienced the same transition, but the older women took longer to adjust.

Not long after Sikander's return, he and Rabia had decided that apart from a brief visit to the office with Jamil to meet everyone there, he would not return to work until he felt well enough to make a contribution. Although the business had not grown significantly, Jamil had run it competently. He was a more cautious young man than Sikander, and that had been just fine in Sikander's absence.

In less than six weeks, however, the combination of cabin fever, his wife's and mother's tendencies to overfeed him to help him regain his weight, and his eager anticipation of Jamil's regular evening reports, drove him to start going to work again.

The family was often invited to visit their friends, including Hamid, now a squadron leader and soon to be a wing commander. Wherever they went, Sikander could be relied upon to recount the story of how he had been shot, captured, sold, and taken to Guantanamo, though he refused to talk about his actual experiences there. He felt it might be dangerous and it was in any case embarrassing to talk of such things as torture in polite company.

Having brushed with Americans in one manner while in captivity and, to a small degree, in a more positive way on his journey back from Cuba, Sikander's interest in things American remained, surprising even him. The news from America, however, was not good. George W. Bush seemed committed to a campaign to "finish the job" begun by his father more than a decade earlier. The neo-conservatives in high places on his team, particularly in the Department of Defense, were in frenzied pursuit of reasons to invade Iraq, landing ultimately on "proof" of that country's program for development and production of weapons of mass destruction. "Regime change" was pitched and packaged for public consumption inside visions of a free democratic Iraq whose narrative might have been lifted from newsreels of the liberation of France in World War II.

Following these developments on TV, Sikander was struck by the way in which labels and narratives could subtly influence interpretation and action, an example being the labeling of weapons. The approachability of a name like "daisy cutter" for a bomb conferred upon it the quality of something on "our" side. Despite its ability to obliterate everything within half a kilometer in all directions, the obliterated things would be bad, and mass destruction wasn't the "intent," so a daisy cutter could never be called a weapon of mass destruction. He wondered how the American political system and media might have labeled it, had it been in the Iraqi arsenal.

In Sikander's mind, American public opinion had been too easily sold on this "legitimacy of honorable intent." He recalled what he thought was probably a defining moment more than a decade earlier, during the first Gulf War, when video pictures of precision laser-weapons delivered to a designated room in a targeted building were shown by American generals. Americans could feel at ease with the knowledge that even if civilians were to get killed with their tax dollars, it would be in the spirit of minimizing unintended deaths and for the greater good. He particularly resented what he felt was a Bush presidency that had chosen to ride a wave of fear within the populace, freeing the administration to make whatever belligerent moves were needed to eradicate choice enemies, especially those lacking a nuclear arsenal. Saddam Hussein, now squarely in the line of fire of Bush's agenda, was a clear target of political opportunity.

Sikander consumed news and editorial opinion avidly. His experiences in Guantanamo permitted nothing less. As far as Sikander could determine, the Bush administration had recognized that the threat to world peace and stability needed a more graspable focus than al-Qaeda, and Saddam fit the bill. He had evicted weapons inspectors, failed to provide evidence of the absence or dismantling of the WMDs in his alleged arsenal, and according to a British government claim that fanned the flames, he already possessed the capability to launch such a weapon within forty-five minutes of forming the intent.

Still, Sikander held few illusions about the Iraqi leader and his legendary brutality. He was by all accounts a terrible individual who needed to be brought to justice.

In the first months of 2003, preparations for America to go to war in Iraq were all but complete. General Tommy Franks had put together his plans, and after much debate with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about the troop levels necessary to accomplish the mission, Franks had about as lightweight a force as he could safely take into Iraq.

Meanwhile, bolstering the rationale for war, Vice President Cheney, was busy arguing improbable links between al-Qaeda and Saddam's regime. Sikander was disgusted. *An imbecile can understand that the rabidly secularist Saddam could never be an ally of the [Salafist](#), Bin Laden*, he reflected.

One evening in early March, Sikander and Jamil were in the lounge discussing the now seemingly inevitable war. Jamil was half inclined to agree with Bush's policy on the matter of regime change even though he, too, detested the president.

"Saddam is, after all, the cause of the previous Gulf War and in any case a pretty unsavory character. Why do we care about a rationale for the impending invasion if removing him is a good thing?" he argued.

"Because it isn't as simple as going in and taking out Saddam, is it? WMDs are just today's rationale. It can be adjusted as the need arises and the mainstream media can be called upon to do its patriotic duty of convincing the American public of whatever message the administration needs to convey," Sikander noted cynically. "Besides, Bush needs this to get more public support as his re-election campaign is about to get going. The problem in all of this is that the people who will be killed or injured won't know why the American taxpayer appears to be seeking their deaths. Do you suppose that a family failing to escape a stray bomb would care that the bomb was being dropped in pursuit of their own freedom and democracy? That they weren't the intended victims?" Sikander emotional momentum was getting the better of him. "And as for terrorism, how many new terrorists do you suppose we'll see emerge from the unintended death of a mother, or sister?"

Jamil rarely saw this side of Sikander and felt intimidated by his brother's simmering anger. "Sikander [bhai](#), I agree with your view about a war in

Iraq. I was just making the comment about the world being better off without Saddam. Surely you agree?”

“I do, Jamil, but do you have any idea how many regimes have been changed without a war since World War II? Don’t you suppose the Americans could organize covert operations to assassinate Saddam? I understand that they’re probably more concerned with the aftermath of his removal, and maybe just killing him and departing isn’t such a good idea. But do you see any effort going into that even now? Surely the same power vacuum will be there whichever way he’s removed?”

Jamil was weighing other subjects to redirect the conversation, when Kausar stepped into the lounge. “It’s pleasant outside. Rabia and I are going for a stroll. Care to come along?” she asked. Sikander declined. Jamil eagerly arose to join them.

It was early morning in Peshawar on March 18, when President Bush issued his ultimatum to Saddam and his two sons: *Leave Iraq within forty-eight hours*. As the day drew on, the news spread throughout Pakistan that Bush was actually going to launch an attack.

Sikander got an unexpected call at the office.

“[Assalaamu ‘alaykum](#), Sikander!”

Sikander perked up at the sound of Junaid’s voice. After the day of his return to Pakistan, Junaid had seen him a few times over the month that followed, but since then he had been scarce and his job didn’t permit him to telegraph his whereabouts.

“[Wa ‘alaykum assalaam](#), Junaid! Nice to hear from you again.”

“Looks like war,” said Junaid.

“I’ve heard. The office is buzzing. What do you suppose will happen?”

“Well, it’s a big subject. I just wanted touch base with you about it. I can’t linger on the phone right now, but we haven’t been together in ages, Sikander. Why don’t I come round this evening?”

Sikander gladly accepted the offer and called home to let his mother know. With Rabia three months pregnant and appropriately irritable, asking *her* to prepare for a surprise guest would be a mistake.

Junaid arrived as expected. After dinner, the TV was switched on to reveal news anchors and retired generals discussing the rich array of weapons technology being readied for the clinically precise delivery of death, interleaved with replays of Bush’s speech. After seeing the speech at least three times, they turned off the TV. Jamil excused himself to pray [isha](#) and go to bed, leaving Sikander and Junaid to chat.

“Bush is the most dangerous person on earth right now,” Junaid remarked.

“Do *you* think Saddam should stay?” Sikander asked.

Junaid shook his head. “No, but I don’t think a U.S. invasion and the death and destruction that will follow is the way to get him to leave. Anyway, the Americans aren’t so naïve as to publicize the real agenda of their foreign policies. We wouldn’t. Why should we expect that they would? And no one in the media seems to be willing to challenge their proclaimed assumptions. Not too hard to understand if you see what’s going on with their media.”

Sikander agreed with Junaid’s assessment on the invasion but even though he had his own opinions about media complicity, he was curious to learn more about Junaid’s comment. “What *about* the media?”

“The media, especially broadcast, has been buying its way into politics for a long time now. Look at what’s happening to rules governing their local TV and radio markets. Hearings conveniently opened to discuss removing limits on consolidating local media ownership, leaving each community with a narrowing range of packaged opinions.”

“Well, we have pretty narrow diversity here in Pakistan, don’t we, Junaid?”

“Yes, we could do better and, who knows, maybe someday we will. But that’s the country that holds itself up as the beacon of democracy—a model for the world to follow. Yet here we have an administration about to enter a war that it needs to sell to the public. They open these hearings and now media owners will toe the line and maybe get rewarded in a few months with more relaxed rules for local TV station ownership. And it can’t hurt to have Michael Powell, the son, no less, of the Secretary of State, be in charge of the Federal Communications Commission. The media companies have made all the right political contributions to buy those favors. Why would they now be critical of the providers of those same favors?” he asked cynically. “So, they understand what has to be peddled to the American public right now. And when the fighting starts it’ll be amphitheater. You of all people should understand how deceptive they can be.”

“Hmm.” Sikander brooded, studying his friend. Junaid was here in front of him now and it might be a while before the opportunity arose again to confront him about his name and his past. Smiling wryly he began, “Speaking of deception, Junaid, when will you trust your old friend enough to tell me your real name?”

“We *weren’t* speaking of that, Sikander.” Junaid replied uneasily. But then, pondering the pain and suffering Sikander had been through, much of it because he had helped Junaid and his son make it out of Afghanistan, he couldn’t see much harm now in answering Sikander’s question. He was about to, when Sikander continued.

“Junaid—or should I say... Atif?—The Americans seem to know quite a lot about you. At least they believe they do.”

Junaid wondered what Sikander, and for that matter, American military intelligence, might know about him. His eyes met Sikander’s with a pokerfaced stare.

“Relax, Junaid. Do you think *I’d* reveal that to anyone?” Sikander asked, almost protesting. “The interrogators. They showed me a picture of you. They said you’re Atif Masood Qureishi.”

It was Junaid’s turn to brood. Finally he sighed, shrugging, “You’re right about the name. And it’s Brigadier Qureishi.”

“I see. Well, um, congratulations on the rank. And is it true that you’re connected with al-Qaeda in some way?” Sikander was too far into this to back out now.

“*No!* At least...not now,” he confided, caught by Sikander’s expectant frown. “We and the CIA, we helped Bin Laden come into Afghanistan while the Russians were there. Osama never did much by way of fighting,” Atif shrugged, “but he did provide a convenient source of untainted non-U.S. money in the wake of the whole Iran-Contra affair and he did train upward of thirty thousand non-Afghans, ostensibly to fight the Russians. After Kuwait, Bin Laden pitched the Saudis to let him lead the effort to protect their oil fields. They refused. They wanted the Americans to do it, as did the Americans. He warned them that America might never leave, but certainly not for several years. Hm!” Atif rolled his eyes and shook his head wistfully. “He was livid when they rebuffed him!”

“Look, Sikander, I *was* a member of [Maktab-ul-Khidmat](#). You could say it was a predecessor of al-Qaeda, but after Azzam was killed, the whole thing went in a completely different direction, and I was no longer on board. Sure, I maintained connections. I had to monitor whatever I could. But no, I’m not a member of al-Qaeda today. Frankly, I’m not surprised that the CIA believes I am. I had this conversation with my chain of command eleven

years ago. They understand what the facts are. If your captors put this theory to you, I'd say they were baiting you or their intel is worse than I thought."

Sikander wondered what else he didn't know about the enigmatic Atif, and what, if anything would have been different about his experiences in Guantanamo if he had known.

"Well—Atif?—I hope you know that you can trust me to keep this between the two of us?" Sikander looked for acknowledgment. He had wanted answers, but not at the expense of their friendship.

Atif nodded, smiling resignedly. "Sikander, I took on the name when we were fighting the Russians. There's no real need for it now. I'm practically retired and I've only kept using the name for continuity with friends who knew me by it. Tell whoever you want."

The two of them talked a while longer, sipping tea and discussing the world after Saddam and the world after Bush; especially the world of Pakistan.



Forty-eight hours after Bush's ultimatum, a cruise missile struck a house where Saddam was reportedly spending the night. What followed was what the Pentagon and the media billed as the campaign of "shock and awe"—a textbook aerial bombardment of command and control positions with a focus on preventing the Iraqis from mounting a coordinated defense against both airborne and ground attacks. Ground forces would soon be advancing on the country and air superiority was necessary to protect those troops. The media mostly played along by limiting itself to being embedded within the U.S. troop units. Its effect was to cause bonding with the troops and to report, for the most part, empathetically. Above all else, the administration was anxious to avoid the televising of body bags and grieving relatives.

With breakneck speed, General Franks's battle plan resulted in a ground troop advance into Baghdad. Over the ensuing months, the U.S. began its descent into a quagmire with its mix of achievements and calamitous blunders. Among the greatest blunders was the absence of a meaningful plan for handling a large-scale evaporation of the Iraqi military, which morphed, along with a sizeable civilian contingent, into a number of deadly guerilla forces.



Ayesha was born in September. Her arrival made Sikander feel as if his family was complete and it made him find any excuse to come home from work early. Ayub and Qayyum, who were almost eleven and seven, were excited to have a little sister. Noor and Sofie were likewise delighted at this replica of each of their own families.

Whether it was the passage of time or the therapeutic effect of Ayesha's arrival, Sikander no longer experienced anxiety attacks or nightmares, and although he couldn't eliminate the physical and mental scars altogether, he regained his strength. Importantly, his short temper on matters of America and Iraq simmered down considerably.

During the Christmas break of 2003, Salman [Khan](#) was visiting Pakistan from America. His image stabilization software business was thriving.

Salman's aunt invited Sofie and her family to a dinner party at her home. Salman was keen to meet Sikander again especially after he'd heard about Guantanamo. He often got into discussions, most of them cordial, with his American friends and colleagues about the nature of the war with Iraq and where America was headed. He looked forward to hearing of Sikander's experiences.

The guests arrived and over dinner, the conversation didn't take long to drift into the topic of the war. No meaningful evidence of the development or production of WMDs had been found, much less the weapons themselves. The insurgency against an American presence appeared to be vibrant and fault lines between Shi'a and [Sunni](#) had exposed themselves in the social landscape everywhere. On a brighter note, Saddam Hussein had just been captured two weeks earlier, and that seemed to engage everyone's interest. Speculation passed around the table of how he would be dealt with and how the whole adventure would turn out for Iraq, for America, and for neighboring Iran. In line with after-dinner custom, the men and women split up to pursue their separate conversations. Sikander opened with Salman asking how Muslims in America had fared after 9/11.

"There was a time immediately afterwards when it was pretty grim for Muslims. A few hate killings, bricks tossed through [masjid](#) windows," began Salman. "That stuff quickly died down. But the country's split about Iraq. A lot of people think it's heading for a mess. Way more muddled than Afghanistan. Still, now that Saddam's been caught, I'm sure the matter of WMDs will be quietly swept under the rug, God bless America!" Salman chuckled cynically, shaking his head.

God? America? The comment struck a nerve with Sikander. "Salman, do you think the God that created the cosmos and managed all of existence for billions of years has formed a preference for blessing an America that's existed for a little more than two hundred years? And what would that mean anyway? If he even cares about nations instead of humans, would he pick America over others? If so, why wouldn't he want to bless Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan at least as much as America? Maybe more if the need is greater? Are the people of these countries not worth as much to him as Americans are?"

Salman was unprepared for such a barrage. "Sikander, I... last time we met you talked about possibly coming to America. It seemed you might even want to live there. Of course, I know about Guantanamo. I couldn't even begin to understand *that* experience, but I suppose I can see how it might have...changed your perspective?"

"Salman [bhai](#)," Sikander replied with a smile, "there's an America that stands for something, the kind of place I always imagined it to be, and who knows, maybe was or even still is..." He paused, suspending a shrug. "The people there are simply letting themselves be led down the wrong path right now." A polite nod from Salman prompted Sikander to continue. "But I suppose there is one thing. Even though it seems to be screwing up, I don't see another country as capable of identifying and correcting its mistakes, as well as America. We certainly don't have that in Pakistan."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Feeling responsible, Sikander continued. "I suppose my remark about God blessing America was more academic than judgmental," he clarified unconvincingly.

"Sikander [bhai](#)?" asked Salman, "How did it feel? You know, to be—"

"To be in Guantanamo?" *Only a matter of time before that came up*, thought Sikander.

Salman nodded. Feeling until now like an innocent bystander, Jamil perked up. He had never heard much elaboration of Sikander's experiences as a detainee.

“I don’t really like discussing it. But it *was* dreadful and totally unlike your descriptions of your adopted country.” Sikander said.

Salman’s long-standing connection with America seemed to draw out of Sikander a need that he hadn’t felt with others in Pakistan. Uncharacteristically, and despite his earlier reticence, he began describing much of his Guantanamo ordeal as well as the things he was sure were being done to other detainees. Salman and Jamil listened in amazement. Sikander cast a wary eye in Jamil’s direction, leaving no doubt that none of this was to be repeated to friends and family. He made a mental note to himself to warn Jamil more explicitly later.

But as a naturalized American, his host that evening was perhaps the best person to be telling. Maybe his experience would lead Salman to feel more confidently informed about a detainee’s firsthand perspective, unavailable to his American friends.

After much probing, but sensitive to Sikander’s tolerance, Salman eased the conversation toward Musharraf’s performance, to how Peshawar had changed, and finally, to Sikander’s and Jamil’s ambitions for Javelin. Eventually, the discussion drifted toward Salman and how his business was faring.

“The economy’s in a bit of a soft spot, probably because of the war, but generally we’re okay. Money’s cheap and I personally can’t complain,” replied Salman, modestly. “Sabrina and I are building a new home just outside Durham. If you ever get out our way, spend some time with us.”

The comment triggered a thought Sikander had mulled over for a while. “Thank you, that would be nice, Salman, but tell me, what would you say are the challenges in setting up a business in America?”

Salman cocked a curious eyebrow. “Are you *thinking* of doing business there?”

“Jamil and I have talked about it.” Sikander shrugged as he glanced at Jamil. “We’re only going to be able to take the company so far in Pakistan, but America is a vast market.”

“It certainly is. Your best bet is probably to buy a troubled, cash-poor player, either a national distributor or regional wholesaler,” replied Salman.

“Buy? How easy do you suppose that would be for a foreign company like ours?”

“Not too hard. There are publications that list such opportunities, and there’s always the Internet. Do a search, find a company matching your requirements, and call them.” Salman replied. “By the way, if you invest a quarter of a million dollars or so, you can even become a resident without a green card. Some kind of investor’s visa program. You might want to call the embassy about that.”

Jamil took note of Sikander’s inquiries, though with little concern that this might be any more than an exploratory conversation. Regardless, it was intriguing.

“Well,” said Sikander, “I imagine there’ll be a time when it becomes interesting. If Javelin was to acquire a national distributor in the U.S. we could use our Chinese sources and buy in much greater volume than we can support here in Pakistan, but the lower costs would also benefit our competitiveness in the Pakistani market.”

“Sikander, if you’d like I can keep an eye out for an opportunity, but it’s such a big place—any particular area of the country?”

Sikander pondered. “Los Angeles might be a good choice for Chinese imports, or New York, perhaps. After that I don’t know, maybe Chicago? Houston? Detroit?”

“I can certainly look into those places, but let me begin with North Carolina or Virginia. At least I’m familiar with the area.”

Rabia, Kausar, and Sofie were asleep in the car as they headed back across Peshawar to Hayatabad, late that evening.

“Were you serious about investing in the U.S., Sikander [bhai](#)?” asked Jamil.

“Reasonably. I mean, thanks to you, we’ve some of the best information systems and lowest cost of operations in our business, so the focus has to be on product costs and that’s what you heard me describe to Salman.”

“Sikander [bhai](#), the logic’s fine, but I’d say it’s down to execution risks—you know, hidden problems we might not see in a company we end up buying? But are you sure you want to do this in America and not Europe? I mean...with your—”

“My ‘experience?’ Huh! No, Jamil, I’m not sure,” smiled Sikander, “but it’s worth considering further, don’t you think? It’s just one possibility, but I like it because it’s a single, large market in many ways, so even if we only bought a regional wholesaler instead of a national distributor, we’d still be able to expand across the country more quickly than across several European ones.”

Months passed and nothing came of Sikander’s thoughts about a presence in America, but he worked diligently on the supply side to conclude more lucrative deals for product sourcing, particularly in China. He traveled to Shanghai on more than one occasion and was impressed with the pace of development there. It reminded him of the transformation he had seen take place in Dubai over the last twenty years.

Shanghai’s gleaming architecture and pristine highways, stirred in Sikander’s mind thoughts of what education and human development could accomplish. Ayesha was already crawling, and his concern for providing the best opportunity for his children was frequently at the forefront of his mind. In this he had no argument from Rabia. On several occasions, they discussed setting up in the United States and although neither of them could imagine a place of greater opportunity for the children, Rabia couldn’t conceal her apprehension about him risking his freedom again.

“If it makes you feel any better, I do still have the State Department letter.” Sikander reminded her. “Dianne said it would make clear to the people in Islamabad that they should issue me a visa or, at the very least, they should ignore that I’d been wrongly held in Guantanamo. But then again, who knows what it *actually* says?”

“If you think it’s the right way to build Javelin, then you should do it and trust in Allah to clear away the obstacles,” Rabia offered. “I certainly like the idea of the children getting their schooling in America or England, but if America’s the right place for business, then [bismillah](#)! I’m with you.”

Over the next two years, Javelin grew substantially. When customers were interested in large purchases, Sikander would occasionally get involved, and in one or two cases he came across buyers who spoke Urdu or English in strange accents. He had kept the business card that Dianne had given him and dutifully called the number if he suspected the proposed buyers to be nefarious. He passed on whatever information he had to a contact person—with the obviously fictitious name of Mr. Flintstone—who took down the particulars each time, never failing to thank Sikander.

Javelin acquired or opened smaller outlets in the [NWFP](#) area, as well as moving aggressively to expand beyond its established cities to add several more nationally. The company grew the diversity of its imports. It also acquired a few local manufacturers. The latter gave them significant cost advantages where customers weren’t looking for international name-brand products, but for the lowest price. The combination of Sikander’s risk-taking and the meticulously cautious approach of Jamil worked extremely well.

By the start of 2006, Javelin was on target to generate revenue of \$9 million and had been floated on the Karachi stock exchange as the nation’s premier wholesaler in its class. Having floated 40% of the company, the family grossed \$16 million.

Flush with this cash, on top of a meaningful stockpile from years of successful operations, the brothers agreed that Salman should now pursue his

search for acquisition targets more seriously. Sikander’s lawyers provided him with the conditions of the E-2 visa for the United States, which would be easy to fulfill, and Salman found a counterpart attorney in Durham who would handle the immigration process once a company had been earmarked.

In mid-March, after two months of searching, Salman finally called with news.

“There’s a regional distributor based in Henderson, not far from where we are,” he explained. “They’re called Caroelectric Corporation, with about ninety million dollars in sales. The company has three hundred and fifty people on payroll and is looking for cash because an eighteen-million-dollar bond is maturing soon. Gordon Elmer’s the owner. He’s seventy-two, and none of his three children wants to buy his company from him or run it. Huh! They’d rather inherit the sale proceeds when he dies!”

“How much is he looking for?”

“Honestly, I think he’ll settle at around seventy-two million for the company’s stock; he owns it all. At his age, net of taxes, it’ll still mean a handy retirement figure. With the company in your hands, you’ll need to put in an additional eighteen million to cover the maturing bond, and for that, you’d issue yourself new stock. Oh, and one more thing, Elmer doesn’t want to act on this until at least September.”

The men agreed on a plan of action. Sikander discussed it with Jamil, who concurred subject to careful review of the numbers. A new U.S. corporation—capitalized with \$15 million in cash transferred from Javelin—would be created. That would provide the necessary U.S. balance sheet for bank financiers or private equity firms to come in with \$75 million in financing. From the resulting \$90 million, the new U.S. company would pay Caroelectric’s owner \$72 million to acquire it and drop the remaining \$18 million directly into Caroelectric, which would authorize additional shares and issue them to its new parent in exchange for the added cash. That would then go to paying the bond at maturity. Salman was to arrange the new company formation, while Sikander and Jamil would coordinate the financing.

April came and Sikander proposed that the family travel to America. Getting firsthand experience of the place was long overdue, and soon, Sikander was finalizing plans for a trip in late July, after Ayub and Qayyum’s school term was over. Dianne’s letter was finally to be put to use. He filled out and submitted their visa applications, adding a note saying he had a sealed letter from the U.S. State Department. He included a photocopy of the envelope showing the State Department seal and indicated that he would make it available in person should the application make it as far as an interview. Not surprisingly, it did.

Sikander and Rabia were interviewed and by June, they and the children were the proud holders of U.S. visas. Excitement in the family mounted until finally, on July 20, they boarded a PIA flight from Islamabad to Jeddah, transferring to Saudi Arabian Airlines, bound for Washington, D.C. the next day. Their month-long tour of America was about to begin.

The family traveled first-class on the eleven-hour flight out of Jeddah. For Sikander, sitting by a window, with pampering service, the contrast between this flight and the one out of Afghanistan, bound, hooded, and shackled in the back of a USAF Starlifter, couldn’t have been greater.

It was two-thirty in the afternoon, Washington time, when the aircraft began its descent. Sikander watched eagerly, wanting to catch his first glimpse of the country. He still couldn’t explain why his yearning to visit America survived unabated.

The approach to Dulles on that clear July afternoon enabled Sikander to see the Washington Monument and the Capitol in the distance, while down below, vehicles streamed along neatly manicured highways, going about their business. Order was everywhere.

The view, combining the icons of American power and ordinary lives being led, gave the scene an emblematic quality to Sikander. *All those people down there, all that civilization*, he thought. *These are the people that Bin Laden is trying to annihilate and these are the people doing their level best to direct their resources to annihilating him and his cronies.*

The family breezed through customs and immigration. Before long, they were in the terminal looking for their luggage, a currency exchange, and a rental car. Sikander was surprised at how effortless each experience was. It contrasted sharply with the obstacles that, absent a bribe or two, seemed to be in the path of any endeavor in Pakistan, but especially one involving civil institutions.

Their first stop was to be with Salman’s family in Durham. The route out of Dulles led them around the periphery of Washington south on I-95 through verdant rolling woodlands and the farm country of eastern Virginia.

Sikander’s focus was consumed by the novelty of sitting in the left seat and paying attention to the GPS system negotiating the highway interchanges at the outskirts of Washington. Rabia and Ayesha were soon asleep. But Ayub and Qayyum gawked at just about everything, delighting in beating each other to the punch in shouting out new and interesting sights, particularly the brands and models of vehicles unknown to them in Pakistan. Two hours out of Dulles, the low sun to their right reflected off a beautifully calm James River as the Range Rover crossed it in Richmond. Another two hours passed, and with a few twists and turns off the highway, they were in one of Durham’s pricier suburbs when the navigation system made its final and welcome pronouncement: “You have arrived.” By now, everyone but Sikander was asleep, but stirred reluctantly to endure the task of piling out of the vehicle.

The tired family was warmly received by Salman, his wife, and their three children, each of comparable ages to Ayub, Qayyum and Ayesha. Finding a second wind, mostly from confused body clocks, it didn’t take long for Rabia and the children to lose all sense of drowsiness. A few, mostly local friends had been invited that evening to meet the new arrivals. After a light meal and small talk about the state of Pakistan and America, the friends left and Sikander, Rabia, Salman, and Sabrina unwound in the family room. Ayub and Qayyum occupied themselves with unfamiliar but engaging games and toys to which they had been introduced upon their arrival. A final evening cup of green tea was served and the four adults chatted idly for a while. Not being much of one for TV shows and movies, and therefore having never heard a French accent, Rabia found Sabrina’s melodic tones enchanting.

Rabia was also fascinated by the home’s décor. Her eyes darted busily from one thing to another and her head swiveled a little more noticeably than normal, as she processed the possibilities for how her home in Hayatabad might benefit from similar design ideas. Her curiosity caught Sabrina’s eye.

“Why don’t I give you a tour, Rabia,” she offered, and in a heartbeat, the two of them were on their way. The house was not small, and Rabia had much to take in and ask about, so it took a while for them to return. While they were away, the two men chatted about Caroelectric.

“I spoke to Gordon Elmer this morning. He’s eager to meet with you on Monday. Still seems hung up about not wanting his life’s work to be destroyed by someone looking for a short-term gain. You really need to focus on how you’re going to take it forward when you meet him, Sikander. And it wouldn’t hurt to tell him you’ll keep the name.”

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem, Salman. Not after he and I have looked each other in the eye.”

Sikander and Salman chatted about a variety of other non-business related topics and before long their wives were walking back into the family room.

“...they’re cherry, which is a popular wood in this country, Rabia,” explained Sabrina as the two of them ambled out of the kitchen. The tour was complete.

Salman noticed that Sikander was flagging. “You can rest up this weekend. I can introduce you to friends or we can go sightseeing. You don’t have

to decide right now.”

The family was shown to their rooms. Rabia and Sikander caught up on a day’s worth of delayed prayers. Ayub and Qayyum shared a bedroom with Salman and Sabrina’s son, Isa, who was already asleep. Ayesha slept in her parents’ room.

“Impressive home, isn’t it, Rabia?” Sikander remarked, as he lay next to her.

“Certainly is. I especially like the bathroom. It must be nice and bright in the daylight. There’s a window in the ceiling.”

“Hmmm...” said Sikander, dozing off.

The weekend was a perfect break for them all. Salman and Sabrina set up a brunch buffet in the kitchen and invited more guests over. The conversations were warm and friendly.

Sikander could see much of the allure of living in this country and the genteel nature of the people he met. What was it, he wondered, about conflicts that heightened people’s inclination to see otherness as a simple caricature of reality—demon or human? Whether it was al-Qaeda’s zealots, soldiers in Afghanistan, interrogators in Guantanamo, or everyday Americans, as here, it was always the human “we” against the demon “other”. *We* would always be textured and complex. The *other* was always simple and one-dimensional, composed entirely of the evil that propelled it to seek *our* annihilation. And in the case of these Americans, what was it that made such individually kind-hearted people like these fuse into a militarily collective intent with often such heartless results? Constantly prowling Sikander’s psyche, these thoughts always gained ascendancy upon his experiencing positive images of America.

The conversations were polite and generally the neighbors, who were all white Caucasians except for one African American couple, exhibited concern for the state of things in Pakistan, such as poverty, and lack of access to good education or health care. Their opinions, though loosely valid, seemed informed largely by TV and the popular press, and lacked the nuances that might bring the conversations beyond the polite pleasantries that they were. Still, to Sikander their concern did seem genuine.

On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, bringing lunch with them, the two families went to the Eno River State Park to unwind. They ate and took a stroll. Whenever they reached a high enough clearing, a vast, emerald carpet of treetops seemed to stretch to the horizon, reflecting perfectly the contours of the hills in which the trees were rooted.

“Can we live here?” Ayub asked.

“You’d like that eh, Ayub?” asked Sikander as Ayub nodded fiercely.

“Me too [Abba-jee](#). Are we moving here?” chimed in Qayyum.

“We’ll see. Maybe...” replied Sikander in classic parentspeak.

“It’s so silent. Not even a hint of traffic,” Sikander said.

“Yes, and so beautiful! So many trees, they go on and on!” Rabia declared.

“So? Would *you* like to live here, Rabia?”

“America, you mean? Or Durham?”

“Well, I know we haven’t seen much of anything else, but I meant the country.”

“Umm...let’s ask that question after trip’s over. I must say, though, I’ve found the people to be a lot more friendly and pleasant than I’d imagined. And the whole place seems so well organized.”

Rabia had come to America with her own notions of American anti-Afghan and anti-Muslim sentiments and, in her [hijab](#), had half expected to be pilloried for allowing herself to be “oppressed” from the moment others laid eyes upon her. Though there might have been such sentiments, people generally left them alone or were outright pleasant. She was also pleased to see Sikander absorbing the environment and the novelty of the experience. Perhaps finally, she hoped, this trip might put some of his demons to rest.

“I have similar feelings about the people but we have to wait and see. I’ve experienced a much darker side and this is helpful for me,” Sikander replied. “[SubhanAllah](#), though, Rabia!” he exclaimed, “The beauty here *is* breathtaking. I’m reminded of the feelings I had when I was in Scotland. I’d still love to take you there someday.”

The following morning, Salman drove Sikander to the Caroelectric offices in Henderson. They were welcomed into the reception area and ushered into a well-appointed conference room where Gordon Elmer and Glen Seymour, the CFO, awaited their arrival. Elmer warmly shook hands with Salman, whom he had met previously, and then with Sikander. Seymour did the same, following which was the ritual exchange of business cards. The men were shown to two of the several leather-backed seats punctuating the periphery of a large elliptical table, beautifully finished in a Carpathian elm burl veneer. A video projector hung from white ceiling panels.

“[Khan](#) and...[Khan](#)?” Elmer said. “I know it’s a common last name, but *are* you two related?”

“Actually we are, but not as closely as you might imagine, Mr. Elmer,” responded Salman. “My mother and Sikander’s mother are cousins, and before you ask the next question, their maiden names were also [Khan](#) and each of their husbands’ last names is [Khan](#). So it’s not a really functional last name,” he explained chuckling. “In fact, Mr. Elmer, it’s really not a name—more a designation of ethnic origin. Sikander and I are [Pathans](#), which virtually automatically means we’re [Khans](#). With migration into western culture, it’s kind of become a last name.”

“Well, *that* was an education.” Elmer remarked. “Anyhow, Mr. [Khan](#) and, um, Mr. [Khan](#), welcome to Caroelectric! We’re truly honored to have you today and we’d like to offer you a short presentation about our company. But before we do, some tea? Coffee?”

Tea and cookies were brought in and placed on the table in front of the two men. From a slot in the ceiling at the far end of the room, a screen emerged, the projector came to life, and the presentation proceeded. Elmer and Seymour described their business, its recent performance, current condition and projections for the next five years, all in considerable detail, pausing courteously as needed, to answer questions, each of which was acknowledged to be “excellent,” “great,” or “good.”

“Mr. Elmer and Mr. Seymour, thank you for a comprehensive presentation. I’m still absorbing much of what you’ve described...” Sikander gathered his thoughts as he counted out on his fingers what else he would need. “Can you please provide me with a hard copy of your material, the names of ten of your best customers for references, a list of key personnel in the topmost level of management, and references from your largest suppliers?”

“We’d be delighted. May I call you Sikander?” asked Elmer.

“Of course.”

“And please call me Gordon, and this is Glen. Salman and I have been back-and-forth on terms, and I think we’re all clear but it probably wouldn’t

hurt to review them directly with you.”

“Certainly. I have a term sheet here that I think matches up with what’s been discussed,” answered Sikander as he pulled copies from his briefcase and handed them around. Everyone reviewed the document, affirming that the deal was as expected.

“That leaves us with how you propose to operate the company,” said Gordon.

“Before you go on, Gordon, Salman’s been clear,” Sikander answered, “that you have strong feelings about how the company will be managed. Let me assure you, Gordon, I wouldn’t be paying this kind of money to disturb something that operates as well as your company does. That’s why I want to know about your most valued managers. We’d like to incent them to remain with us after you sell. And we’re certainly not interested in chopping the thing up to sell off the parts. So please don’t be concerned. Your baby will be in good hands!”

Gordon smiled and exchanged glances with Glen. “Well then, I think we should get you the things you asked for and we can start the lawyers on drafting contract language. Meanwhile, we can’t let you leave without a tour of our facility.”

“Lead the way!” Sikander responded enthusiastically.

The four of them proceeded out of the boardroom. Gordon stopped by his assistant’s desk. “Julie, I need you to put together a few things for me,” he said, and itemized most of the things Sikander had asked for. He told Sikander privately that the management summary would be sent to him directly via e-mail.

The tour gave Sikander some new ideas for automating certain functions in Javelin’s warehouses. Meanwhile, he continued asking intelligent questions.

As it was summer, some members of the management team were on vacation, but others were present, and Sikander was pleased to meet them. Gordon presented Sikander and Salman as potential customers to keep the proposed transaction confidential. When they got back to the office, Julie had already assembled a package for the two visitors.

The visit was wrapped up. They said their good-byes and drove back to Salman’s house where Rabia had gathered their luggage so that the family could begin the rest of their vacation. There was just one issue.

Sikander and Rabia had a general sense of what they and the children wanted to see, but they had left specific plans until now, not knowing how long things might take with Carolelectric. The serious business of planning the rest of their vacation was upon them.

“I really want to see the natural parts of this country, Sikander. I know they have some beautiful national parks,” Rabia said.

As the children had different ideas, a compromise was reached and the vacation began with a scenic drive to the famed Disney World theme park, followed by a couple of delightful days taking in its entertainment. Ayesha was more than disappointed at failing to meet Space Mountain’s strict height requirements. After additional visits to nearby Busch Gardens and Cypress Gardens, it was time to drop the car in Orlando and fly out to California.

The family continued the vacation, flying from one location to another, renting cars and exploring each locale. For Rabia, the majestic sheer face of Yosemite’s El Capitan and Half Dome and the regally magnificent serenity of Sequoia’s General Sherman tree, were the high points. She also enjoyed the wilds of Yellowstone, where the children waited patiently for almost an hour to be rewarded by Old Faithful’s enormous jet of steam hurled skyward to a height of over fifty meters. Despite his delight and fascination with just about everything he saw, one place beckoned Sikander more than any other—the place that had such a shaping influence on who he had now become—New York.

Flying into the city two days before the family was due to return to Washington for the flight home, they took a cab into Manhattan, taking rooms at the Pierre Hotel, close to Central Park. The following morning Sikander decided he would go alone to Ground Zero. After breakfast, leaving Rabia and the children to indulge themselves with the Pierre’s legendary buffet, he quietly hopped into a cab. Less than half an hour later, he was standing at the corner of West Broadway and Vesey Street, gazing out at the excavated chasm where the twin towers had once stood. It was being readied—after much dispute—for resumed construction of the barely begun Freedom Tower.

In every respect the space was nondescript. Still dumbstruck after so many years, it was incapable of speaking the unspeakable horror it had witnessed. Yet here it was, the epicenter of a geopolitical tsunami that had spread out from this spot, and on that terrible day swept up and transformed so many lives across the globe, including Sikander’s. His mind projected and replayed haunting TV vignettes of the tragedy, layered over the scene in front of him, as if by doing so, he might glimpse some explanation, some meaning. But the place was devoid of any. It was just there.

New York had many other things to offer a first-time visitor. The children relished their ride to the top of the Empire State Building and although the Statue of Liberty was not open for ascent to the crown or torch, the family took the trip out to Liberty Island just the same. Poor Qayyum couldn’t get over how a statue could also be a building. But for Sikander, no place touched him quite like Ground Zero.

With the month over, the family flew back home.

Back in Peshawar, with memories of the trip fresh in everyone’s minds, Sikander and Rabia discussed the relocation that was sure to be needed with any acquisition of Carolelectric. The trip had done a great deal to allay Rabia’s lingering fears that Sikander might, in any way, suffer from having been a terror suspect and a Guantanamo detainee. Both she and Sikander were convinced, the children were enthusiastic, and the decision was made to move forward with all speed to acquire Carolelectric and with almost equal speed, to move Sikander’s family to America.

Due diligence was completed. Sikander had no difficulty arranging the financing for the transaction and Electrodis International was formed as the locally acquiring U.S. company, following which it was capitalized as planned. By September 2006 Electrodis owned Carolelectric Corporation.

The transaction completed, and promises of frequent visits back-and-forth lovingly given to Sofie, Noor and the rest of the family, Sikander, Rabia and the children said their parting [salaams](#), before flying back to America—this time with Jamil, who traveled on a business visitor’s visa. Everything was set for an orderly transition of control.

With a theatrical flair, Gordon Elmer arranged a ceremony to hand over the keys to the new owners and as a matter of private symbolism for the way it had altered his life, Sikander, asked that the date of Monday, September 11, be chosen for the event. He had already arranged for an apartment in Henderson, which would give Rabia time to research the local real estate and pick either a lot for construction or an existing home. Jamil stayed in the apartment with them during his visit.

About a month earlier, Gordon Elmer had held a meeting with his direct reports to confirm that he was going to step down and that a transaction was underway in which Electrodis International would be buying Carolelectric. He had been honored by a special retirement party at the beginning of September and was back that Monday to participate in the ceremony. Management and staff were all present.

Gordon met Sikander and Jamil at the reception foyer. He introduced his seven senior management team members to the brothers. Sikander and Jamil shook each man’s hands warmly while simply nodding, equally warmly, to the two women.

Gordon made a speech to the assembled staff introducing Sikander and Jamil as the new owners. He talked about what it had meant to him to create and build Caroelectric and how much he'd valued having them as employees. He said a few words about how everyone could rely on the new management to continue in the best traditions of the company. Sikander followed him, offering his vision for Caroelectric and how pleased and excited he was to have the opportunity to be working with them all and leading the company in its next phase of growth. As he wound up his speech, Gordon turned to Sikander.

“Mr. [Khan](#), we'd like now to hand you the keys to Caroelectric!” A door leading from the warehouse into the reception area swung open and a man came through grinning cheerfully and holding a golden key about a meter long. “Being a key,” Gordon said, “we thought it would be best if it was presented to you by our director of security. Mr. [Khan](#), please meet Jim Mahler.”

Sikander was listening to Gordon while looking down, in the stance of someone politely absorbing what was being said. As Mahler's name was mentioned, he looked up reflexively. His knees turned to jelly, his complexion paled, and he broke into a cold sweat. Briefly, he gripped Jamil's arm to stop himself from falling then equally quickly, regained his balance.

Jim Mahler's natural grin morphed into a fabricated one. His heart hadn't beaten this fast in years. Slowly, stiff-lipped, he raised the large key and presented it to Sikander. For the two men, the event became a theatrical parody—complete with audience—of Sikander's liberation from Mahler's clutches over four years earlier.

“Thank you, Mr. Mahler,” Sikander said, wearing a stone-faced smile, as he held out his hand to take the key before passing it to Jamil.

Exhibiting no evidence of his inner reluctance, Mahler's hand came out to meet Sikander's. The hands shook each other, devoid of owners.

“You're welcome, Mr. [Khan](#),” came the reply.



Chapter 19

Redemption

THE KEY CEREMONY OVER, concluding with appropriate fanfare, all the gathered employees—including Mahler—finally dispersed and returned to work. Sikander struggled valiantly to avoid revealing any sign of the withering impact of the encounter with his onetime tormentor, but even the simple act of walking proved challenging. It took all his conscious effort to remain upright as he and Jamil went up to the executive suite conference room with Gordon, Glen, and the other senior management staff for a planned in-depth briefing about the company's new direction. Once inside the room, Sikander hurriedly approached his seat at the head of the long table and promptly dropped into it, not completely masking the tumult that was raging in him.

"Are you okay?" Glen's question further heightened Jamil's anxiety having earlier felt Sikander's hand briefly, but unexpectedly grip his arm.

"I'm fine. I think I was having a dizzy spell. Huh! Jet lag probably," Sikander feigned. "Please, let's continue."

Lost in his present situation, Sikander let Jamil do most of the talking. From time to time he nodded intelligently and threw in the odd question to appear insightful, but his mind was spinning, consumed by thoughts of Mahler.

Here was a man who had transgressed the bounds of human decency while serving in Army Intelligence, but who was now in this job, living an ordinary life with an ordinary purpose. An impenetrable wall had existed between the two men in Guantanamo, and despite being sometimes only centimeters apart, a yawning gulf had separated them. Now, Sikander was on Mahler's side of that wall.

With the meeting finally over, Gordon Elmer said his goodbyes to his colleagues and to the new owners before taking a limousine back to Raleigh-Durham and a flight to his summer home in Vail, Colorado. His retirement had begun. After reviewing priorities and plans for 2007 with department heads, by early afternoon, Sikander and Jamil were done for the day. They drove back to the apartment.

"What went on back there?" Jamil asked.

"Hmm? Nothing. Just...jet lag, I guess," Sikander deflected, adding an unconvincing yawn.

"I don't *think* so, Sikander [bhai](#). It looked like something else to me and I think you should talk to a doctor. Have you found one yet?"

"No. We're going to be doing all those things in the next week or two. We still have to find a house, remember?"

Whatever it was, thought Jamil, Sikander clearly didn't want to talk about it. Jamil let the subject pass. He was scheduled to go back to Pakistan at the weekend to be there a few days before [Ramadhan](#). There would be time to discuss anything if it was serious. The brothers arrived at the apartment and began planning the rest of that week's tasks.

Rabia had mastered the kitchen. She set to work preparing something, but not up to her usual standard. Several specialty utensils still needed to be purchased before she could demonstrate any of her considerable skills with Pakistani and Afghan cuisine.

Sikander couldn't put Mahler out of his mind. Despite his attempts to relax, his anxieties failed to evade Rabia's ever-watchful eye. Her love for Sikander had only grown over the years, and always conscious of how lucky she had been to be given a new start with his return from Guantanamo, she was compulsively on heightened alert when it came to the slightest deviation from the norm with him.

"Sikander? Something wrong?" she asked.

"No. Why?" replied Sikander, feigning mild surprise.

"Are you sure? You've been looking worried today," she probed.

"It's nothing. Really. Probably jet lag, but I think I'm getting over it now anyway."

She seemed to buy it. Sikander took advantage of the moment to change the subject.

"I haven't spent enough time with the children lately. You know? Just playing with them? That should help me unwind." He didn't wait for an answer but turned directly to Ayub who was thumbing through a copy Architectural Digest.

"Ayub, we're looking for a place to live, near a good school for you."

Ayub dropped the magazine on the coffee table in front of him. "Yes, I know. I don't suppose we'll find a rare one that does cricket?" he asked. "I'd like to try for a school cricket team if possible."

"It's not an important sport in America, [bettha](#). I think you know that. But they do have others that you'll be able to get into. There's soccer, basketball, ice hockey, American football, and baseball. That's quite a selection, isn't it?"

Ayub was unimpressed. Cricket was his country's national obsession. "How about playing at home?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose we *could* get Jamil [Chachu](#) to bring cricket gear on his next trip back. There are lots of parks around here, so we shouldn't have trouble finding a place to play."

"I suppose." Ayub shrugged resignedly. "When do we start school?"

"We still have to select one, but first we have to get your physical exams done and sort out a few other things. It shouldn't be more than a week or so. We'll get Qayyum into the same school if possible. That'll make life easier for [Ammee-jan](#) to take you there and back."

"Oh, I don't think I want to be driving in this part of the world just yet!" Rabia called out, having overheard the conversation from the kitchen.

"Rabia, if you can drive on the streets of Peshawar, it won't be so bad. You just have to get used to looking in a different place for the rearview mirror. The rest is natural. But you do still need to pass the test here."

"Well, I *could* try it...hope you don't mind if I wrap the car around a streetlight."

They performed the [maghrib](#) prayer, ate dinner, and followed with [isha](#). The children were sent to bed and Sikander, Rabia, and Jamil sat in the apartment living room. Although it was late, the doorbell rang. It was Salman, who had come over to check up on them and to enquire how the day had proceeded.

"So, a captain of American industry now, eh, Sikander?" Salman had a gleam in his eye. "Congratulations to you and Jamil! You've pulled it off. Your mother will be proud and I'm sure your father—Allah grant him peace—would have been."

"Thanks for all your help and encouragement, Salman!" said Jamil. "We couldn't even have tried this without you."

"You're welcome! It was fun for me too! Actually, I came over because Sabrina and I would like to invite you all to our place on Friday evening. Jamil, you're traveling back on Saturday, right?"

"Yes, and frankly I'm missing home already. I can't wait to go. Sikander [bhai](#), Rabia [bhabhi](#), I don't know how you'll be spending [Ramadhan](#) here. It's hard to imagine doing that without family and friends."

"Oh, thanks!" chimed an indignant Salman. Jamil dutifully apologized.

"So? Get much work done today?" asked Salman.

Jamil's eyes darted to Sikander recalling his brother's unexpected behavior when receiving the key. Sikander didn't want the experience dissected.

Ignoring Jamil, he fixed a silent gaze on Salman. Salman began to feel uneasy. Checking himself, Sikander moved quickly to prick the bubble.

“Rather smoothly,” he said, lightheartedly. “Now that I’ve seen how this kind of thing is done, I almost feel like starting my *next* deal!” he joked. “In fact, Jamil will tell you, I was so giddy that my head even spun briefly while they were handing me a symbolic key!” Sikander chuckled.

He quickly moved past the subject to describe the rest of the day. “It was useful to hear the executives talking about their own roles and plans for next year. They’re an impressive bunch. I’m sure they’ll help me settle in quickly.

“Jamil will handle things in Pakistan. He’s going to set up a video link so it’ll feel like we’re much closer.”

The conversation drifted to housing, medical facilities, social security numbers, and driver’s licenses. Salman was a huge help in explaining what appeared to be daunting tasks to Sikander and Rabia.

On schools, however, Rabia had a jump on things. “I think I’ve found a good school here,” said Rabia. “It’s called Kerr-Vance Academy, which the local people speak highly of.”

Sikander’s head spun toward Rabia. He beamed, pleasantly surprised at her initiative. Pleased with herself, she read his look perfectly.

After an hour or so of idle chatting, Salman reminded them all of Friday’s invitation, excused himself, and left. They, too, were tired. Knowing Tuesday would be a longer day than Monday, they went to bed.

“All right, Sikander,” Rabia began when they were in the bedroom. “What’s wrong?” Her look was stern.

“What do you mean?”

“*Sikander!*” she exclaimed, annoyed at not being taken seriously enough. This time she would settle for nothing less than the truth. “Something’s gnawing at you and you haven’t been yourself this evening. I’m your wife. Remember?”

Sikander frowned. He couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t tell anyone. Not until he had things sorted out in his own mind.

“Rabia, it’s...it’s been a long day. I have to be back there in the morning to start running things. I have to decide who’s doing what, whether I’d like them to stay or go, how to replace them if they do go, and I’m...I’m just feeling some stress from having to do all these things. You’re probably just noticing that. Can we drop this now?”

Some of it stuck, and after a moment’s hesitation, Rabia nodded submissively. Since Guantanamo, Sikander had, after all, suffered anxiety attacks and maybe this was just a milder form of one. Maybe they hadn’t completely gone away as she’d come to believe, or maybe it *was* simple stress as he had claimed. Either way, she pulled back from pushing that particular button. It did little to ease her worries.

Sikander couldn’t sleep. He was unable to decide whether to maneuver Mahler out of the company or keep him on. It wouldn’t be easy to let him go. It would send the wrong message to his employees if he were to show up and fire Mahler, two levels below his position as CEO, for no apparent reason, especially if the man had been an excellent performer.

On the other hand, if he were to fire him, and even perhaps come up with a believable rationale, he risked being outed by Mahler to the rest of the company out of spite. Sikander had absolutely no intention of revealing details of his captivity and interrogation to any but the very closest of his friends and family. No one at Carolelectric fit that bill. Uneasily, he settled on a path of taking Mahler to one side and having an honest discussion with him about the proverbial “hippo in the room.” If it became apparent that Mahler was not so competent or a serious personality clash ensued, it might create an opening for rationalizing his firing. If he behaved like a professional then things might be awkward for a while, but why not let events unfold a little?

Julie Barnes, Gordon’s executive assistant, remained with the company. Sikander was impressed with her self-propelled personality and asked her to stay on. She found Sikander to be pleasant and courteous and imagined him not to be the kind of boss who would bark orders, relegate her to making the coffee, or chew her out for a minor mistake. She was a slim forty-one with a regal-looking elegance. She was settled in her life, which gave her a quiet demeanor and a good sense of humor. Professionally, she had an uncanny sense of anticipation of her boss’s needs.

Julie was worth her weight in diamonds to Sikander as he took his first tentative steps at the helm of Carolelectric. He was surprised on arriving in the U.S. by just how much remained to be understood of the American social fabric, and for that matter, its corporate culture. Hollywood had left out the more pedestrian gaps and Julie would be the one to fill them in. She was a valuable asset in helping Sikander get through the admistrivia of establishing an official identity. Social security numbers, driver’s licenses, choices of health care providers, and registering the kids for school, all had to be dealt with. Julie was also quick to point out that she could be relied upon to perform many of the errands associated with these tasks, to take that kind of load off her boss, leaving him free to focus on the business.

On September 12, Jamil and Sikander arrived at Carolelectric, proceeding directly to the CEO’s office. Before leaving Pakistan, Sikander had emailed Julie to create a sitting area consisting of a couple of armchairs and a coffee table in the corner closest to the office entrance, which she dutifully arranged. He had been inspired by a local Starbucks branch on his prior visit and liked its casually informal feel. Despite the new furniture, rectangular patches on the walls emphasized the locations of previous wall art and the presently unoccupied state of the room. It looked sad and unloved.

The two men set down their brief cases and leaving Jamil in the office, Sikander stepped out to talk to Julie. “Julie, how’s my schedule looking for today?”

“Let me look that up for you,” she answered as she pulled up his calendar on her screen. “You have the 2007 budget review with Jamil and Glen from 10:00 to 11:30. After that, each individual department head, one after another, will join the three of you to present their budget proposals. You should be able to get through at least the first four or five today and finish the program tomorrow.”

“All right, it’s eight forty-five right now. Ask Jim Mahler to join me at nine. I need to have a chat with him and we won’t wish to be disturbed.

“I’ll get on it,” replied Julie, curious as to why Sikander would want such a meeting. Anyone’s unplanned meeting with the security department was usually ominous. If the security director got involved, that meant it was more serious, and for him to be meeting the CEO, couldn’t be more so.

Sikander returned to his office. Jamil was studying one of Glen’s budget-related memos.

“Jamil, it’s going to be our first shot at the budget today and we need to be well prepared. It’ll set the right tone for going forward. I have to get a couple of things done, but if you go and meet Glen now and preview the budget with him, both of you can come back here for our ten o’clock.”

Jamil agreed and left for Glen’s office.

A few minutes passed before Julie rang on the phone intercom. Mahler was waiting. Overcoming a vengeful urge to prolong the wait, Sikander asked her to send him in.

Mahler stepped into the office, closed the door gently, then boldly, almost menacingly, strode toward Sikander, seated behind his desk. His face was expressionless but he put Sikander on edge with his unorthodox manner.

“Have a seat, Mr. Mahler,” said Sikander flatly. He pointed with his outstretched palm to one of the armchairs at the back of the room.

“Mr. [Khan](#), shall we cut the crap?” began Mahler in a low voice as he tossed a sealed envelope onto Sikander’s shiny and otherwise paperless, cherry desktop. On it the words “SIKANDER [KHAN](#)” were scribbled in large letters.

“What’s this?” Sikander asked. Mahler had instinctively seized control of the conversation. Was he just playing mind games with Sikander? Had he simply switched on his considerable Army Intelligence instincts, or might Sikander himself be giving Mahler the opening to dominate him by subconsciously telegraphing submission in some long-buried conditioned reflex from Guantanamo?

“My resignation letter.” Mahler’s tone was defiant. Sikander glanced only briefly at the envelope and didn’t pick it up. It was bait and he wasn’t taking it. He locked eyes once again with Mahler.

“Mr. Mahler, please sit down,” he persisted in a subdued but firm tone. He resented Mahler having taken the initiative and fought to suppress the anger that was bubbling up inside him.

Mahler finally broke contact. He turned around, and approached one of the armchairs. With all his army training, deep down Mahler still found it difficult to ignore an order from a senior authority figure. Sikander was no longer the shackled, disheveled scrap of a man at the mercy of Mahler’s nod to launch the MPs into their terrible action. His hair was combed back and his beard was neatly trimmed. In his open-collared shirt, cashmere sweater, casual pants, and expensive shoes, Sikander was projecting wealth and power in a country casual package.

Mahler’s moment of resignation drama notwithstanding, there was the practical matter of not wanting to be out on the street looking for employment. Puzzled by Sikander’s demeanor, he reluctantly took a seat. Sikander calmly came out from behind his desk and joined him.

“I wanted to have this conversation because I’d like to make sure we understand each other,” Sikander began. “I’m only concerned with your performance and I...I don’t...” he took in a deep breath and let it out as he embarked upon a lie. “No matter what I might feel about our...past relationship, if you’re doing your job well here at Caroelectric, that’ll be all that matters as far as I’m concerned.”

“You’re...serious.” Mahler was astonished, puzzled, and skeptical. Seeing a weakening, Sikander took his shot.

“Why wouldn’t I be, Mr. Mahler? Do you think I bought this company so I could have the satisfaction of firing you? Or do you think I paid ninety million dollars because it made business sense?” asked Sikander. “And if it makes business sense, why would I undermine that by firing someone out of spite?” Sikander felt his urge to vent getting the better of him. “Don’t misunderstand me, Mr. Mahler. For what you did? Oh, I’d *love* to act with spite, but then, as I told you when you...tortured...me for saying the slightest thing you didn’t want to hear, I’m a businessman. But you? You used your job to vent your feelings. I happened to be available for you to indulge a lust for revenge in the guise of, huh! Interrogation. You did it with at least one wrong person. I don’t suppose you know the U.S. government accepted its mistake.”

Mahler gave an unapologetic “humph” and turned away. He was wrestling with conflicts, the foremost of which was between the need to avenge the loss of his friend, Tony, and the possibility—though in his mind remote—of having treated an innocent man as brutally as he had.

For his part, Sikander realized that although he had vented only a mere sliver of his considerable animosity toward Mahler, certainly nothing resembling [badal](#), this meeting would go nowhere if he left it at that. Anxious to avoid the controversy being exposed by a shouting match that would be heard outside the office, Sikander needed a more conciliatory tone.

“Mr. Mahler, to whatever degree has been possible, I’ve come to terms with what happened to me. I don’t *condone* what you did and I...I don’t honestly know if I can ever *really* forgive it.” Sikander shrugged. “It’s a complicated matter for me.”

“I was doing my *job*,” protested Mahler with only a little less resentment than earlier.

“Yes, well, right now I want to respect your expertise.”

“I don’t understand how...” began Mahler, struggling with what was being said to him. His minimum expectation had been a simple firing.

Damn! How did he get released? Mahler struggled to get past the question. Of all the people he’d interrogated, Sikander was among the most likely to be a member of al-Qaeda. Mahler had been sure of that. Yet here he was, free, thriving, and objective about the business. Mahler had not expected such detachment. He was trained to be suspicious and to crush opposition, not question its validity. It was his nature to expect others to be similarly driven.

“Mr. Mahler,” said Sikander, “Look, I...I think a willingness to be cruel and brutal is in me—certainly in you—in us all, really. Civilization—yours, mine, doesn’t really matter which,” he said, “it’s a way of curbing brutality with some kind of code, a structure that creates confidence...lets the weak feel they won’t be attacked or robbed of their possessions—or their dignity—by the strong. But once people are permitted, or even encouraged, to operate beyond the reach of law, well then, as you so amply demonstrated, that brutality will only be limited by the forces at our disposal—no matter who we are.”

Sikander paused but had clearly more to say.

“Was the way I was treated in X-Ray your fault? I think it was. We can’t disown our own behavior. But it was also the fault, and continues to be, of this government for condoning or encouraging that behavior.”

Mahler’s convictions began to fracture. He was confused, unsure of what to think. His silent expression made Sikander feel the need to wrap things up.

“We could probably go on about those experiences forever. But for now, can we at least get back to work and take things a day at a time?”

Mahler’s face reddened. It was with the embarrassment from standing naked before a fully clothed onlooker; a look he was familiar with, but only as the onlooker. Sikander had come to understand the interrogator better than the interrogator understood him, and to Mahler it was like nakedness. He felt the urge to accept the situation and continue with this “interesting” man. Still not completely convinced of Sikander’s innocence—and who cared about acknowledgments or presidential interventions?—he found it hard to accept that his own behavior at Guantanamo might not have had a mote’s weight of justification. The cracks in his conviction began once more to fill. No, he would stick around and maybe even trap this man in a slip-up. After all, he’d gotten a pretty good measure of the buttons to push when Sikander had been detained. Mahler would wait it out. But for now it wouldn’t pay to be too honest, he thought.

“Mr. [Khan](#), uh, on reflection, and...and after listening to what you’ve said, well, I guess it might be wiser to stay on if...if you’re willing to have me stay.” Avoiding eye contact, Mahler evicted the last few words.

Sikander nodded solemnly. It was time to take “yes” for an answer. He got up, went to his desk, retrieved the envelope, and gestured it toward Mahler. “Can I tear this up?”

Mahler nodded. Sikander tore the envelope and tossed the pieces ceremoniously into his wastebasket before facing Mahler again. Mahler’s hand came out in a tentative gesture. Sikander examined it for a moment before taking it in a lukewarm handshake. Neither man completely understood his own feelings at that moment, but each had formed his own reasons for why it was worth continuing the uneasy relationship.

Sikander stepped out with Mahler but felt the need to draw attention away from him. He turned to Julie and asked her to get some wall art that

would at least cover the unsightly patches on his walls. She immediately began busying herself at an online store. Sikander poured himself a cup of coffee and stood outside his office pensively gazing around at what he'd bought.

"We'll have something by Thursday, Mr. [Khan](#)," said Julie.

"Hm? Oh, thanks. By the way, Julie, please call me Sikander." He felt lighter. A burden he'd been carrying for so long that he'd lost all awareness of it, had just disappeared. It was approaching ten o'clock and right on cue, Jamil and Glen strolled to his office and were ready to start.

"So? Will we still be in business next year?" joked Sikander. The three of them chuckled as they entered the office. The budget review process was a baptism of sorts. Sikander had little familiarity with many of the American market-specific terms and concepts being described to him. But he was a quick study. Instead of trying too hard to grasp the details, he leaned on his instincts to judge the people working for him and get a sense of their own grasp of their specific areas of responsibility.

By the end of the week, Jamil was on a plane back to Pakistan. Sikander and his family, meanwhile, began the task of settling into Henderson, North Carolina.

Summer gave way to fall and with it the [Khans](#) were treated to all the blazing splendor that Henderson's trees could offer. Beyond the hiccup with Mahler, the transition had gone smoothly and Sikander grew comfortable in his role as CEO. Indeed, the family as a whole was taking root.

The weather became cooler, but luckily in 2006, no hurricanes hit the continental United States, something that hadn't happened since 2001, when at the height of hurricane season, the nation had hardly been able to focus on the weather. The family found a new six thousand square-foot home not far from the Kerr-Vance Academy. They could certainly have afforded a larger space but they didn't want to get ahead of themselves. Besides, Sikander wanted to do great things with the new acquisition before directing the family's wealth toward luxuries. To top it off, neither Sikander nor Rabia were comfortable with the idea of a mortgage, given the body of Islamic opinion on the inadmissibility of the receipt and payment of [riba](#). They paid for the property outright.

At the time that Javelin had bought Caroelectric, neither company had done much to develop a strong Internet sales channel. In Pakistan, where Internet purchases were relatively rare, it was of little consequence. But rather than build more physical facilities in the United States, Sikander and Jamil decided that a large warehouse near the FedEx hub of Memphis, would be the best way to pursue expansion of the business online. That would enable any order to be fulfilled without inventory being in the wrong place. They would keep supplying their existing walk-in warehouses with the most popular products, while the central warehouse would provide lower costs in a more scalable approach to stocking the full product range. As long as customers could tolerate an overnight delivery and as long as costs of inventory management could be made low enough, they would be able to operate with an overhead advantage, allowing prices to be more competitive than most locally based suppliers. Internet marketing with a good business-to-business brand-building plan, had to be the priority.

Launch of the national distribution hub became integral to the company's annual plan for 2007. In January, Sikander began scouting for a location in Memphis. At the same time, thanks to Jamil, the much-anticipated video link with Peshawar was established. The brothers were often to be found conferring or else in family "video fests," always popular with the children.

One evening in early February, while browsing the Internet for information about lithium-ion battery manufacturers, Sikander was intrigued to find one in Scotland. His attention drifted as he recalled his experiences learning to operate the Stinger more than twenty years earlier. Abruptly, he realized that he might be able to search for the place where the SAS training had taken place. Sure enough, when he compared the place names that came up in his searches of "Stinger training of [mujahideen](#)" with Google's online mapping, he was able to see satellite images of those places. One place stood out. It was correct topographically. It was oriented as expected relative to the water and islands. It was Applecross.

As he browsed the map online, long-forgotten memories of place names last seen on road signs bubbled up to the surface of his consciousness; places that he and his fellow [mujahideen](#) had visited or passed through on the bus tour all those years ago.

Over the following weeks, without letting Rabia know what he was up to, he arranged for a detour on their next trip to Pakistan, which was due to take place in early April. He concocted a story about stopping in London for a few days for a business meeting, which provided a perfect cover for their UK visa applications.

April came. Arrangements were made for the children to stay with Sabrina and Salman until Sikander's return. He planned to be back earlier than Rabia, who would to stay on to spend time with family. After they landed in London, Sikander broke the news that their four-day stopover in the UK was in fact to visit Scotland. She was delighted with the surprise.

One more flight from London to Glasgow, where they rented a car, put them within five exhilarating hours of driving into Scotland's northwest. They proceeded along the west side of Loch Lomond, past Loch Linnhe to Fort William, then past Loch Lochy before heading northwest to Applecross. The weather alternated between heavy downpours and bright sunshine, but the beauty was unrelenting.

"This place is wondrous, Sikander!" Rabia said as her head turned from one scene to another.

"Wait until you see Applecross," he replied. The day that had begun in London just after sunrise was drawing to a close. Rabia was enchanted by the setting sun amid the clouds shooting shafts of light into the hills, valleys, and lochs of the highlands. By late evening, the car's tires were crunching the graveled driveway of the Applecross Inn, a charming hotel set in leafy woodlands overlooking the water toward the Western Isles. After a late breakfast the following morning, Sikander and Rabia took a packed lunch and left the inn to explore.

"See over there?" Sikander pointed out a thin stretch of land to their north. "That's where the camp was, I'm pretty sure, and those are the islands I told you about. The weather's perfect. Let's just walk around here for the whole day, shall we? We can even sit down and enjoy the sunset when the time comes."

"Sikander, it's...heaven! The breeze is so sweet I can taste the air! And just look at that water. Flowing diamonds glittering in the sun!" exclaimed Rabia.

The couple strolled along taking in the scenery, the light Scottish breeze, and the patchy sunshine. From time to time they stopped to absorb some especially engaging aspect of how the light played on the vista. Lunch was taken by the water's edge, and as the evening drew on, most of the clouds had died out allowing the sunset to oblige the visitors by delivering on Sikander's promise. The red halo he'd told her about twenty years ago came to life while they gazed out over the water to the islands in the distance, among them the enchanted Skye. Sikander basked in the scene and the validation of his now fabled stories of the place. He made her grant him the accuracy of his claims, which she willingly did. That night was a belated honeymoon, as there hadn't been much of one in Laghar Juy. But they enjoyed it in every way imaginable, as if it had been their first.

The second day was spent driving around the Isle of Skye culminating with a brief—but for Sikander, nostalgic—stopover at Broadford airfield, after which they began their departure by driving to Fort William and staying the night there. The following day, they drove to Glasgow and flew back to London. On the day after that, they were on their way to Islamabad. Sikander was back at work within a couple of weeks. In Rabia’s absence, a nanny was engaged to look after Ayesha while the two boys largely took care of themselves. Sikander juggled his schedule to allow more time at home than usual each day.

As part of his efforts to be better informed about the business, Sikander decided to connect with second-level management and he periodically set up either breakfasts with small groups of them or visited them individually in their offices to see what they did and how they did it. After a few such occasions, subconsciously giving himself some practice, he decided it was time to reconnect with Mahler. The appointment came and Sikander visited Jim’s office on the lower level. He knocked on the door and got the expected response to enter.

How predictable and how unpredicted, thought Sikander as the visual cues around him recalled the picture Mahler had shown him during interrogation to make a point about his 9/11-victim friend. On the walls hung pictures of different types of shotguns, various certificates, and what looked like prize awards. Behind his desk on a credenza he had three pedestal-mounted gold awards with his name engraved on them. There were two other pictures, including the one with DeLea, showing each of them holding a clutch of bagged ducks after an evidently productive day.

Sikander took a seat and opened up the conversation. “You seem to enjoy hunting.”

“No awards for astuteness,” said Mahler in a feeble attempt at caustic humor. “But yes, I do like to hunt. Ever done it yourself?”

The question awoke a conditioned reflex in Sikander as a quiet shiver traveled up his spine. The calm tone of Mahler’s questions in Camp X-ray had formed an inseparable link to the severe and painful punishment that followed. Concealing what had passed through him, he responded. “Not in the sense you mean, unless you count Russian helicopters.”

“Huh! Yeah... Hinds, right?”

Sikander nodded, interrupting a wistful recollection before returning to the subject of hunting.

“Where do you hunt?”

“North Carolina. Virginia. There are lots of places along the coast here as well as inland. I like to hunt where I can use a boat blind. It gives me some flexibility and I enjoy being on the water.”

“Interesting. I’ve been a ‘hills-and-forests’ person all my life, but I must say I’m attracted to the possibility of boating. Kerr Lake isn’t too far from here and it seems like a good place for that sort of thing, don’t you think?”

“What kind of boat did you have in mind? I know something about them.”

“I’m not sure I had anything in mind, but it seems that something in the twenty-five to thirty-foot range might be a good choice?” Sikander was not particularly sure of himself on the subject and, at a more basic level, had only recently begun to attune himself to American units of measure.

“Hmm, well that’s a pretty decent handful for a boat. You’ll probably want to get lessons.”

“Thanks, I’ll look into it,” responded Sikander. “Now, about security,” he asked looking at his watch. “What are the important things you focus on?”

Mahler thought about the question. He wasn’t used to being asked about his work by the company’s seniormost executives. They usually took it for granted. It was a little suspicious for him to see the CEO appear concerned about the subject. Mahler opted for a professional response.

“We generally aren’t worried about intellectual property or espionage,” he remarked, waving a hand. “But we do care about warehouse pilfering, insider-sponsored theft, that sort of thing.

“Another concern is damage or theft of capital equipment. Computers, office equipment, maybe tools on the warehouse floor. We also care about backing up important information, documents, computer systems, and protecting them from hacking, even...even terrorist attacks. Jim was hard-pressed to hold back a cynical smile. “You might be interested to know that quite a few hacking attempts come out of Pakistan, though most come from China, West Africa, and the Balkans.”

“And how do you know you’re being effective?”

“Each of these areas, personnel, information, capital asset, and inventory protection has its own set of metrics, that we can monitor and improve upon. I have one person in charge of each. So if we get a theft of inventory, we can compare that to the total and make a judgment about whether we’re improving or getting worse. It’s something I’m continually working to improve.” Jim explained with justifiable pride.

“I see. And how do you report it?”

“The information’s collected weekly. I put it into a monthly view, and report it up to Glen in a quarterly view unless he wants something ad hoc or to drill deeper.”

“Sounds pretty well organized,” noted Sikander, genuinely impressed. “Jim,” Sikander used Mahler’s first name for the first time, “you may recall I mentioned last December that we should be expanding to support online sales? Well, we’ve found a promising location, so tell me, what would be special security concerns for that kind of setup?”

Jim gave a thoughtful pause before responding. “I guess I’d have to take a look at the place, but off the top of my head? TV security systems, inventory recording, spot checks, things of that nature. [RFID](#) tagging would also make a difference. And, we’d need to improve upon employee background checks, especially for certain critical information access roles.”

“Hmm...well, give it some more thought. I’ll be coming back to you to take this further,” Sikander said before rising to leave. The tension lingering between the two of them, although diminished, encouraged Sikander to depart hastily, but as he did so, Jim belatedly managed to sputter out a polite: “Thanks for...” the office door closed “...stopping by.”

As the year progressed, Caroelectric Corporation secured better supply sourcing deals from China, which enabled Javelin in Pakistan to operate at better margins. The brothers decided they could afford to bring wholesale prices down for Chinese products and still make acceptable profits. Driving their less resilient Pakistani competitors into distress, Javelin either picked them up for rock bottom prices, or bought their assets as they folded.

As early as March, with the help of Sabrina’s deft hand, Rabia had managed to furnish and decorate the new home in an interesting Mughal motif, with a few modern design elements. Now, coming back from Pakistan, she brought several family members with her for a housewarming that was set to take place in late May. They included Noor, Razya, Sameena, Jamil, Kausar, Sofie, Ejaz, and Hinna and all their children. Abdul Rahman and Sabiha had not been able to come as Sabiha was hospitalized for minor surgery.

Sikander didn’t want to risk Saleem or Abdul Majeed coming. Their [Taliban](#) past would probably still have haunted them all the way to U.S. immigration, even though neither of them had ever fired a shot at American forces. Certainly, neither of them relished the idea of being hauled off to

Guantanamo at the president's pleasure in the awful footsteps of their brother-in-law.

The family visit was tumultuous. Everyone congratulated Sikander and Rabia for the life they had put together and the station they had reached, but none more so than Hinna, Rabia's long-time "[khowr](#)." The years may have demanded it, but they hadn't exacted their customary price from Hinna's youthful beauty and although their luster wasn't quite the same, much of the magic clung to her enchanting eyes. Especially when she smiled.

"Rabia, [mashAllah](#), what a long way you've come! Twenty years now we've known each other and who would ever have believed then that this is where your nest would be now?

"[Alhamdulillah](#), Hinna, after all we've been through it's wonderful not only to be living here but to have you all out here. We feel so blessed just to be alive and to be able to recognize such blessings for what they are.

Two weeks later, the housewarming guests returned to Pakistan.

Ayub and Qayyum had a good year in school and it didn't take long for a North Carolina drawl to take root. The same had begun for Ayesha who had just completed a pre-school year.

Rabia made several new friends among the neighbors and more broadly. She sometimes thought about how far she'd come from being a poor village girl in Laghar Juy—a dim and receding memory now—to becoming an affluent woman in suburban North Carolina with a very passable grasp of English. No work of fiction could have dreamed up *her* unlikely story. Indeed, her ability to recount her history made for fascinating conversation with friends, who also delighted in her priceless but rare mistakes with the language. She didn't, of course, volunteer any information about Sikander's Guantanamo experience or her own parallel miseries stemming from it.

With the weather holding, Sikander arranged a company barbecue, as another chance to get to know his employees. To his surprise, Jim showed up. Equally surprisingly, a woman accompanied him. The interaction was appropriately cordial.

"Jim and...?"

"And Louise," she responded, with a warm smile.

Sikander welcomed her with a polite nod though customarily, without a handshake. *Wonder if she has any idea what kind of a man he was five years ago? How did he unwind after a day's work then?* Sikander speculated. *Still, he's probably a lovable guy right now. Who knows? Maybe he didn't know her then.*

The barbecue was a success, even without booze. Sikander was convinced that such outings were a great way to meet the cultural needs of the business. He quietly resolved to repeat them.

From a work point of view, Sikander was engrossed in the routine issues of day-to-day business decision-making. He was frequently on the video link to Jamil and rarely made any move without his valuable input. His management style of general affability wrapped around a core of steel, made him resolute when others would perhaps more readily cave. But he never came across as stubborn. This endeared him to his own management team, adding to company cohesion and turning it into a serious competitive force. Carolelectric was still tiny by comparison with much larger international players, but as far as Sikander was concerned, that was a matter of time.

Just before Labor Day of 2007, the children went back to school, with Ayesha now enrolled into Kerr-Vance's kindergarten. The weather in North Carolina was still excellent. The first weekend after Labor Day, having left the children at a sleepover with Sabrina's children, Sikander and Rabia went to Kerr Lake to enjoy the beautiful day. It reminded them of Applecross and in some ways even Laghar Juy when the streams were in full flood.

"There's something special here when the afternoon sun shimmers on the water," remarked Sikander.

"Mmm...remember when you saved me from the river?" asked Rabia with a gleam in her eye.

"Oh yes," responded Sikander in mock weariness. "[Alhamdulillah](#), it wasn't very deep, but with the current—"

"Yes? Sikander, what *would* you have done if it had been deeper?"

"Wouldn't be here today!" chuckled Sikander.

"You wouldn't have come after me?" she came back indignantly.

"It would have been hard, Rabia. I can't actually swim. Never learned how," he lied, teasing her.

"Well, I think you *should* learn. I'd hate to be in the same position with all this water around us and *then* discover what you just told me!" Her own girlish giggle reminded Rabia of when they were younger. "Sikander, we're blessed, aren't we?"

"God, yes!" replied Sikander. "With what *we've* been through? Huh! Can't complain of having had a dull life!"

"Hardly! Perhaps we should see if we can make it just a little duller?" They both laughed and each time they seemed to be over it, another glance at each other set them off again. Rabia changed the subject.

"Ayub's doing really well at school. I think this was the best move for the children. They have such good facilities in the schools here. Computers, books, art materials, science labs...it's all very impressive." Rabia reflected upon just another of her many sources of happiness. "You should come one of these days, maybe the next parent-teacher conference."

"I will, [InshaAllah](#). And it's great that Ayub seems to have taken to baseball quite happily. What about Qayyum and Ayesha? How are they doing?"

"Probably too soon to say, but as I see Qayyum sometimes picking up Ayub's books at home, I think he's learning quickly. His reading and math reports are excellent."

As the sun began to cast a vibrant reddish glow, a million orange shimmering stars reflected off the tiny ripples and waves of Kerr Lake. The couple looked over the lake one last time before finally walking back to their car and driving the short distance home.

All was finally right with their world.

By the end of November, on the outskirts of Memphis International Airport, Carolelectric's national distribution warehouse was almost complete. It was a marvel of automation, especially the pick-and-place function Jamil had insisted on. Incoming products could be racked in bulk, but the challenge lay in filling an order, with its random requirement to pick out items from anywhere in the warehouse and efficiently get them into a shippable package. They would need to be retrieved from well ordered racks and placed in electronically tagged collecting bins, allowing each bin to be tracked until its contents were deposited into a pre-labeled shipping box before being delivered to one of several outbound shipping bays.

Along with the warehouse, a new Web site was created and a new marketing campaign to promote the Internet capability was launched.

With the Christmas holiday season fast approaching, Sikander decided that the senior management should be taken to Memphis to see for themselves the engine of their next phase of expansion. He also felt it important to have his family members there for a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Rooms were booked at the Westin in downtown Memphis and a special senior management party was also arranged, not only to celebrate the new opening, but also the fact that the company had surpassed the hundred-million-dollar mark for sales that year.

“Kids! Hurry up!” Rabia cried out, putting the final touches on her own packing. Sabrina and Salman had kindly agreed, once again, to babysit Ayesha, though she was increasingly insulted by such a term.

The rest of the family visitors were somewhere or other around the large house, getting themselves or their loved ones ready. Sofie was proud of her sons and what they had accomplished. From small beginnings in Peshawar with what Sikander’s grandfather had started in the early 1950s, this was indeed a major new phase of his legacy and her late husband’s.

Taking limousines to the airport they were all soon on their way to Memphis. That Thursday night, December 20, everyone was settled in their rooms and suites, sufficiently tired to fall fast asleep right after [isha](#). The following day at one in the afternoon, there was to be a brief opening ceremony, a cutting of the ribbon, and then a lunch buffet laid out in the warehouse itself.

Since introducing Jim Mahler to the Internet concept toward the end of the prior year, Sikander had him lead implementation of all safety and security provisions at the new facility, and thought it would be appropriate to have him come to the ceremony and point out the state-of-the-art technology used in the warehouse. Jim’s relationship with Sikander remained lukewarm despite almost a year of reasonable efforts by Sikander. But no longer in the Army, Mahler had no authority to do anything, especially in the absence of reasonable cause. So he remained at arm’s length from Sikander, carrying out his job as best he could, while also remaining watchful of the possibility that Sikander might still be some kind of al-Qaeda “sleeper,” using the company and his position as a cover.

The warehouse’s gleaming white exterior, graced by a large retention pond with a fountain greeted the visitors as they stepped out of the several vehicles that delivered them to the premises. The front of the building consisted of a modern well-appointed office complex with a common area, behind which was the main warehouse. An enormous box, one hundred and eighty meters long by sixty meters wide, its interior had been remodeled to handle the company’s product range.

When everyone arrived Jim and the site manager, whose first task was to distribute a hard hat to each visitor, received them. They were led inside in two groups, one with Sikander and one with Jamil. Rabia was with Sikander with Ayub and Qayyum in tow. Sikander joked with her about how odd she looked wearing the bright white hard hat with the rest of her black outfit—a black [shalwar](#) and [qamees](#) with a silver thread-embroidered pattern and matching embroidery on a black chiffon [dupattha](#). He offered a mock apology for the unavailability of black hard hats. The indignity of the problematic fashion statement was at least eased a little from knowing that all the other women were in the same situation.

At the far end of the building was a row of receiving bays for incoming goods and a different row of loading bays for outbound shipments. An advanced picking system enabled fulfillment of orders almost completely automatically. Preceding the bays was a packaging area and in front of that, numerous racks of products were arrayed in neat rows. The racking was a modular type running to a height of over six meters, held firmly in place by steel lag bolts driven into the concrete floor.

Jamil provided most of the descriptive commentary to the senior management visitors, while Sikander did much the same in [Pashto](#) for the family members. The tour groups followed the same path by which products generally entered, were processed, and left the warehouse.

As they came to the major racking areas, Sikander began his description: “Now, this is where we hold packaged products, like switches, small transformers, motors, and packaged electrical pumps, and these racks are set up so that we can stack to a very large height and still pick products from the top row. Where automation doesn’t apply, we still use forklifts. In fact, one is coming this way right now, so I need everyone to step over here...”

Sikander pointed to a spot just behind where he was standing. The forklift operator had cautiously approached the group so that he wouldn’t strike anyone with the vehicle. As soon as he sensed that the danger had passed, Sikander continued. But his attention was caught by the absence of any lag bolts in the flanges at the bottoms of the racks closest to where he and the group were standing. He made a mental note to himself that he would talk to the facilities people to get that corrected in the morning, and resumed his role as guide.

“In these racks, we have a total of almost ten miles or sixteen kilometers of shelves in this building alone—”

Abruptly, Sikander stopped. As if in slow motion, the forklift was returning and its driver, paying inordinately more attention to the visitors than to where he was going, was in the process of snagging the empty forks in the same racking that was missing the lag bolts. He had proceeded a little more confidently than he should have, perhaps even showing off for the visitors. The forklift’s three thousand kilograms, at even its slow speed, was enough to impart a violent jarring motion on the racking, weakening its vertical members, and briefly lifting its improperly secured legs four or five centimeters off the floor.

Sikander saw what was about to unfold and had already projected that Jim Mahler was standing in the most exposed position. The adrenalin sharpened his faculties and slowed the passing seconds. He subconsciously extrapolated the path of the racking’s contents, and could see a way to get to Jim while avoiding the threat from most of the falling objects with only minor injury given his hard hat. He lunged forward and shouted: “Look out!” in the general direction of Jim. Barely a second later, Sikander’s arms pushed Jim violently to the side and out of harm’s way. However, the racking’s contents had just begun disgorging from the shelves and a small but heavy switchbox had landed on the floor near Sikander’s feet. With his momentum directed toward protecting Jim, Sikander tripped on the switchbox, which caused him to fall, as Jim himself fell out of harm’s way, while packages continued to fall or roll off the shelves of the now collapsing structure.

Instinctively, everyone retreated from the metal avalanche. Everyone but Sikander. The group was horrified at the developing events but most especially as the last section of the racking unit descended onto Sikander, who could be seen raising his arms in a reflexive but futile defensive posture. Hideous sounds were followed by an even more ugly silence.

The contents of the shelves had rained down on or around where Sikander lay. Hard hat or none, it didn’t seem like a survivable experience. The horror of the scene paralyzed everyone, but as the shock subsided, new sounds rapidly filled the vacuum.

“*Sikander!*” screamed Rabia and Sofie together. “*Sikander!*”

He lay on the ground, barely visible through the disorderly heap on top of him. Mahler picked himself up, taking a little longer to absorb what had just happened. Finally, he leapt toward the pile of twisted metal, as did Jamil, Ejaz, and Abdul Rahman along with every other able-bodied male in the immediate vicinity. In frenzied haste, they began clearing things out of the way.

Sikander stirred and gasped weakly.

“*Sikander!*” Rabia moaned as she hurried toward him.

Slowly regaining consciousness, Sikander was in a daze, and could barely make out the scene around him. Inexplicably, he felt deeply drowsy, unable to keep his eyes open. Before long, his crushed ribs and lungs began leaking blood, which slowly dribbled out of his mouth. Bleeding internally, he coughed and sputtered, as he felt himself drowning in his own blood.

Abruptly, he imagined himself to be in water having stepped off—or had he fallen out?—of a small boat. He could see the beautiful girl across—what was that?—a shoreline? A riverbank? She was wearing a black [gamees](#) and a black [shalwar](#) with a beautiful silver-embroidered black chiffon [dupattha](#). Her eyes looked expectantly at him as she beckoned with her right arm, calling out, “Sikander! Sikander! Sikander!”

His dream of a night long ago in the Khyber hills had come back to him. Or had he returned to it? He couldn’t tell. He was under water, yet his mind conveyed only floating. It was all he could sense. Just floating—in space and time. Floating up toward the girl—*toward Rabia? Back.* A renewed struggle. *Back toward the surface of the water. Have to get through. There! There she is!* Still under water, he could see the girl’s solitary form, fragmented by the gentle waves in the water’s surface. For a moment it seemed he might connect with her. He reached out. She was surely his destiny. She had to be.

Jim pressed his ear to Sikander’s chest. The heartbeat was weak. He felt for his pulse and shouted, “Someone call an ambulance!” Several cell phones were already being put to use.

“Come on! Come on! Hang in there, buddy!” Jim urged. “Please hang on! Oh, my God, Sikander, stay awake! Please! *Please, God!*” he prayed.

Breakthrough! Sikander felt himself emerge from the surface at least with his head or mouth. He gasped as he opened his eyes. He was with her. His head was in Rabia’s hands. He saw Jim Mahler crouching by his side with Sofie and Jamil looking on behind, their faces twisted in anguish. Sikander’s eyes moved from side to side and fixed on Jim. The briefest flicker of a smile visited Sikander’s bloody lips.

“Oh, thank God! Sikander, stay awake!” cried Jim.

Sikander moved his weakening gaze toward Rabia and briefly the smile became more pronounced.

“[Bhai-jan!](#) [Bhai-jan](#), come on! Stay with us! The medics will soon be here!” pleaded Jamil.

Sikander’s lips moved weakly, mouthing nothing anyone could hear.

“Quiet! He’s saying something! What’s he saying?” asked Jim openly.

Rabia knew. So did Jamil. “He’s saying the [kalimah](#). ‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger.’ It’s what we do when we believe...we’re dying,” explained Jamil, his eyes red and a solitary tear running down his cheek. Jim returned his attention to Sikander while Rabia held his head and wept.

In less than five minutes, the paramedics arrived. Seeing Sikander under the contents of the fallen structure, no questions were necessary. The forklift still enmeshed in what was left of the buckled racking, told an eloquent, if grisly, story. Sikander’s upper body had been subjected to massive blunt force trauma.

His eyes still open, Sikander’s expression left his face.

One of the paramedics, who had been listening for a heartbeat quickly removed a defibrillator kit from his bag and applied the paddles to Sikander’s chest. Despite the physical injury and the probable aggravation of the trauma from an electric shock, he had little to lose to try to get a heartbeat going.

After four spirited attempts he finally conceded defeat.

Sensing who she was, a female paramedic laid a gentle hand on Rabia’s shoulder as she slowly shook her head. Her eyes closed tightly, Rabia began shaking her own head as her entire body convulsed. Reluctantly, Jamil closed Sikander’s eyelids.

“No...Noooooh!” Rabia moaned in soft denial.

“[Abba!](#) [Abba-jee!](#)” protested Ayub while Qayyum stood speechless, crying next to his mother.

Sofie, by now alongside Rabia, gripped her tightly then collapsed, hardly able to breathe. She was quickly intercepted and made to lie down with someone’s jacket as an improvised pillow while she whimpered uncontrollably, still praying for Sikander’s survival.

It was down to Jamil, Ejaz, and Abdul Rahman to regroup the family and follow the ambulance while Rabia and Sofie rode with Sikander. Sofie rocked to and fro in her seat praying while Rabia could only look upon her beloved husband and weep. The paramedics were sure he was gone, but that had to be a doctor’s call. It didn’t take long for them to arrive at Methodist South Hospital in Whitehaven. Jim Mahler followed in his rented minivan with several management colleagues.

Within half an hour of arrival, Sikander was pronounced dead. By now, not even Sofie expected a different outcome. In a moment of quiet calm, tears streaming, she slowly shook her head, and uttered the familiar [ayah](#): “[Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji’un](#).” The remaining family members, crying or moaning, briefly forced themselves to make the same coherent utterance before resuming their sorrowful lament.

In keeping with the Islamic injunctions against delay, with Rabia’s agreement, Sikander was buried in the nearest cemetery equipped for Muslim burial, which was between Galloway and Hickory Withe, about forty-five kilometers from Memphis. As far as the family was concerned, this was where Allah had decreed he should find eternal rest and that was that. Jamil canceled his arrangements to return to Pakistan with Kausar as he’d planned, and everyone remained at the family home for several days after returning from Memphis.

Christmas Day in Henderson saw a rare but light snow flurry as the doorbell to the [Khan](#) household rang. Ayub answered the door to Jim Mahler.

“Hello, son. Is your mom home, or your Uncle Jamil?”

Having recognizing Jim from the fateful warehouse visit, Ayub let him in and called out for his uncle. Jamil came to the foyer and greeted Jim, asking him to come in. There were no “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas” greetings under the circumstances, but Jamil was curious.

“Jim. Come on in please, what can we do for you?”

A frown of surprise briefly creased Jim’s brow before he resumed the appearance of one bearing condolences. “I...I wanted to express my regrets and sympathy,” he said.

Too weary and troubled to recognize any of Jim’s fleeting surprise, Jamil nodded, acknowledging the condolences. His eyes were sore and wet. He had been unable until now, to stop himself mentally replaying episodes of shared experiences with his departed brother.

“I can ask her to come, but in [Islam](#) we have a waiting period called [iddah](#). She can speak to you, but she’ll be observing the veil.”

“Oh that...that won’t be an issue,” declared Jim softly, “and I won’t linger. You, uh, you folks must be pretty occupied right now.”

“No, no, that’s all right, Jim. I’ll get her. It won’t be a moment. Have a seat. Please.”

A couple of minutes later, Jamil returned with Rabia. She wore a dark gray shawl drawn well forward on her head. Jim arose from his armchair in deference to her, noticing how the rest of her clothing was drab and without any form of ornament. She and Jamil took seats on the sofa facing the armchair, as Jim sat down once more. Staring at a point on the floor by Jim’s feet, Rabia acknowledged his presence with a slow nod.

“I wanted to say how deeply...saddened and sorry I am that...” Jim paused to take a breath, “...that Sikander died saving my life.”

“Yes, Mr. Mahler, it was in his nature to look out for people,” replied Rabia. “Saving lives was something he just did. He saved me from drowning

once...a long time ago. He was—" Rabia choked, but after all the weeping of the past several days, she was too exhausted to cry.

After waiting to let Rabia regain her composure, Jim uneasily continued, "I um, brought this." He pulled out a small box, gift-wrapped in dark gold paper and tied with a black ribbon. "Please don't open it right now, but it's something I think you should have."

"Thank you," replied Jamil, unsure of how to interpret the gesture, but taking the gift from Jim just the same.

"I..." Jim began, but then hesitated as he studied both his hosts. Cautiously, he asked a question he only now realized needed to be asked. "Sikander...hadn't...told you about me, had he?" As much as he needed to ask the question, Jim could see it didn't need answering. Jamil's puzzled expression was answer enough. As Jim picked up on the expression, a wave of self-loathing passed through him. It was a new insight—an insight into the personality of the man whose life he had once tried to make as miserable as possible and who had given up that life to save his.

"About you?" asked Rabia. She glanced at Jamil hoping for meaning. Jamil shook his head and shrugged.

"What *about* you, Jim?" he asked.

Jim drew his breath and slowly exhaled. There was a crushing feeling in the pit of his stomach and the last thing he wanted to do at that moment was what his soul commanded.

"Mrs. [Khan](#), Jamil, I have to tell you that I used to...I used to be in Gitmo, and uh, Sikander was...well, he was one of my detainees there. I was his interrogator and I um...I didn't treat him very well," Jim choked as his eyes reddened, glistening and his lips quivered. In a wavering voice he continued, "I know now how...wrong I was and I just... I don't have the words to say how really, *really* sorry—"

"Jim, what? What are you saying? Gitmo? You mean Guantanamo? You knew about...you *knew* him? You were his, huh!—" Jamil couldn't continue.

Rabia wore an unseen frown. What *was* this nonsense she was hearing? It didn't add up. "How could that be?" she thought aloud. "Surely Sikander would... Sikander would have—"

Recollections of that evening of the first day in the office, when Sikander had been handed the golden key, came flooding into her mind. Sikander had brushed off his preoccupation, and snapped at her for worrying. Of course! It was clear now! The man sitting in her living room, the man whose life her husband had given his own for, had been Sikander's tormentor. Following an involuntary shudder, Rabia rested her forehead on a trembling hand and cried.

Arriving at the same realization regarding the key ceremony, Jamil struggled to understand his brother's reasons for keeping Jim Mahler's identity from him. His mind raced recalling details of the Guantanamo experiences that Sikander had chosen to share, none of which had included Mahler's name, but each of which now amplified his disgust. Jamil felt a new bitterness. Indeed, it was directed both to his brother and to Jim. Neither he nor Rabia could say anything.

Jim broke the silence. "What I did, I know it can't make any... God knows Sikander did more than any man I know to prevent it from making a difference," reflected Jim. "I don't know now if I could ever be forgiven for it. I just had to come and let you know how ashamed and sorry I am. If there was anything I could do to undo what was done in those days, I swear I'd give my life to do it now."

"You know better than we do, what you did to my brother, Mr. Mahler," said Jamil with disdain, no longer able to use Mahler's first name. Mahler's earlier moment of surprise came flashing back to Jamil and he realized now that their visitor had arrived ready to feel their resentment.

But Jamil hadn't known and neither had Rabia. Jamil continued: "And while I won't forgive you, out of respect for Sikander's memory, I'll neither discuss this with anyone else nor use it against you. My brother's memory means too much to me to taint it with...vengeance."

"Sorrow, forgiveness; those will be matters between you and God," came the voice from behind the veil, "and whatever true repentance you might feel, not toward us, but to the Almighty. For myself, I hope you use this remorse to guide the rest of the life that my husband bought for you." Rabia paused to regain her breath. "Perhaps that will be God's way of giving you the chance to understand what you have done to yourself."

For the first time her eyes were opened to an insight that her husband had arrived at years ago, during his days in captivity.

"If there's anything I can do—" began Mahler.

"Mr. Mahler, I'll be returning to Pakistan with my children. I will try my best to forget you—"

Again Rabia choked. Wishing for nothing more now than for Mahler to be out of her presence, she turned her veiled head away and waved her arm toward the door. Jamil's silence conveyed much the same. Mahler arose from his seat and paid his respects: "Jamil. Ma'am," before seeing himself out.

As the shock, denial, and anger subsided, Jamil's attention turned to Mahler's gift. He weighed whether to toss it in the bin or open it, but his curiosity drove him to the latter. It contained a small box and a letter. He handed them to Rabia, who opened the box. In it was a medal suspended from a blue ribbon with several red and white stripes down the middle and on the back of the octagonal medal were the words "Soldier's Medal" with the name James A. Mahler Jr. engraved. She unfolded the letter, which turned out to be two separate sheets. The first was for Jamil and Rabia.

Dear Jamil and Mrs. [Khan](#),

Words cannot express my sorrow and regret for Sikander's death. In the short time I knew him, I found him to be the most genuinely likeable person I have ever met, despite my own efforts to remain cold and distant to him.

You must already know I was the man who tortured him five years ago. I don't care what the government calls it. That's what it was, and I live with regret of that fact every day of my life, a life Sikander gave his own to preserve. With that courageous act, he spoke to me to say that despite all I had done, he still thought that my life held value. It was an act I could personally relate to, as you will see if you read the note accompanying this letter. I think Sikander would have understood why you should have what I've left for you. I am truly sorry and, for what it's worth, I am resigning from Carolelectric effective immediately.

Sincerely,

Capt. James A. Mahler, ret'd.

Rabia studied the letter a while longer. It did nothing to deliver the kind of meaning her soul hungered for. She handed it to Jamil and opened the smaller note. It was printed on U.S. Department of Defense letterhead, and contained a concise description of an act of heroism on Jim Mahler's part in saving his fellow soldiers and two civilians in a fire at considerable personal risk to himself. At the bottom of the note was an explanation of the medal's criteria of issue:

The Soldier's Medal is awarded to any person of the Armed Forces of the United States, or of a friendly foreign nation, who while serving in any capacity with the Army of the United States distinguished him/herself by heroism not involving actual conflict with an enemy. The same degree of heroism is required as for the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross. The performance must have involved personal hazard or danger and the voluntary risk of life under conditions not involving conflict with an armed enemy. Awards are not made solely on the basis of having saved a life.

Rabia handed this, too, to Jamil. In her emptiness, there was little consolation, and it made no impact on her feelings toward Mahler, though it heightened her sense of Sikander’s consummate integrity for keeping the matter from her and the family. He had obviously tried to protect their sensibilities in the face of his own decision to keep Mahler.

James Mahler sat behind the wheel of his car next to his wife, Louise, staring at infinity. A minute passed without a word, and then he started the engine and drove away. He had begun the search for something he wanted badly; something he had seen in Sikander and that had thus far eluded him. It was the same search his once victim and then savior had completed years ago, ironically with Mahler’s unwitting, yet cruel assistance. He was seeking his own humanity, which years of hateful corrosion had enveloped and almost, but not completely, concealed.

THE END



Glossary

A novel like *SIKANDER* covers a large sweep of geography and culture. Not surprisingly, many terms are used from different languages and the reader generally can get an inkling of meaning from the context in which a word or phrase is used. However, I thought it would be attractive to create a substantive glossary of all the words or phrases that might seem strange to one not immersed in the culture or environment of the novel. Owing to the diversity of settings, I’ve somewhat unconventionally arranged the glossary to have each word and its language identified, following which is a succinct meaning, and then a more in-depth elaboration for the REALLY curious. If there are uncommon abbreviations, those too are included with “English” in that case being implied rather than stated. Also to make things a little easier, all words are transliterated into Latin alphabet form. Often, alternative forms are widely used and in such cases they are separated by a semicolon. Where a closely related word exists whose explanation makes sense to provide in conjunction with the original word, it is added alongside the original, separated by a comma.

I am indebted to the kind assistance of Mr. Hamid Sibghatullah for his review of the Islamic terms in this glossary. Any of the nuanced topics could probably each take up an entire book and we have obviously tried to manage the content to a reasonable degree of succinctness. In this regard, as a Muslim, I must acknowledge that several descriptions have been given in the Glossary regarding Islam and Islamic principles, laws, culture etc. While I have strived to ensure the accuracy of the content, if there is any error then please know that it is not intentional and I seek forgiveness of Allah, Subhanahu-wa-ta-’ala for such error as there may be.

An important theme in *SIKANDER* is the Pashtun tribal code of Pashtunwali. Owing to its nature and to provide a richer sense of the cultural backdrop for Pashtun life, several terms appear in the Glossary that do not appear in the text but are relevant to a more complete understanding of Pashtunwali. All terms which form part of Pashtunwali are delineated as such with the parenthetical reference under the term in question, regardless of whether they are mentioned in the text, or not.

Lastly, there are always many points of view and levels of scholarship that inform the discussion of the meanings of words and terms. I do not profess to be especially knowledgeable about these though I have taken to using research and consultation with others more knowledgeable than myself when the need seemed to present itself. It is highly unlikely therefore, that everyone will agree with my own renditions of many of the meanings and such readers are invited to visit the website for the book: www.sikanderbook.com to offer their own input on the blog pages, or send me an email via the website.

Abaa

Pashto

Father. *A term for one's father.*

Abba, Abba-jan; Abba-jee

Urdu

Father. *Term of endearment about or to one's father; with -jan or -jee adds more respect.*

Aba’i

Pashto

Mother. *Used to refer to a mother but not to address the mother.*

Adey

Pashto

Mother. *Term of endearment directed toward a mother.*

Afridi

Pashto

A major tribe of the Khyber region.

Alhamdulillah!

Arabic

Praise be to Allah!

‘Alim

Arabic

Knowledgeable one. *One who is qualified and recognized by the community of [‘ulema](#) as having sufficient knowledge of [Islam](#) to be permitted to transmit it authoritatively to others.*

Allahu Akbar!

Arabic

God is great! *Muslims believe that given the boundless greatness of the Almighty, a simple superlative like “greatest,” connotes comparability where none exists. God is incomparable with anything and the normal English translation of akbar is therefore “great,” rather than “greatest.”*

Allahu a’alam

Arabic

God knows [best]. *Refers to matters of conjecture where the speaker is deferring to the greater knowledge of God and acknowledging the conjecture for being just that.*

Allah Hafiz!

Arabic

God protects! *May God protect you. A common invocation at a time of parting. It is often uttered as “Khuda hafiz.” In this case, “Khuda,” is a Persian word whose Indo-European root, “Khud”, meaning “self” and by implication, self-sufficient, is actually the same as the one for the English “God.” Some Muslims have shunned using Khuda and adopted the use of Allah, but most scholars agree that “God” is an acceptable English translation of “Allah,” so a Persian one can be no less acceptable.*

AK-47

Abbr.

The Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle. *A Russian made and much copied small arms weapon using a 7.62mm round from a typically 30 round magazine clip.*

Ammee, Ammee-jan
Urdu
***Mom.** Mother as a term of endearment to one's mother; with –jan adds more respect.*

APC
Abbr.
Armored Personnel Carrier.

Apostate
English
***One who has relinquished the beliefs and practice of religion.** Most typically refers to Muslims who have turned away from [Islam](#).*

Asr
Arabic
***The afternoon prayer.** The third of the five daily obligatory prayers for all Muslims.*

Assalaamu 'alaykum
Arabic
***Peace be upon you!** The customary greeting at the start of interaction between Muslims; loosely equivalent to Hello, Good Morning/Afternoon/ Evening.*

Assalaamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatullah
Arabic
***A form of greeting that is typically uttered at the end of prayer.** It is directed to each of two angels (on the left and right) ever watchful of, and recording a person's deeds or actions.*

Assalaamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatullahi wa-barakaatuhu
Arabic
Adding beneficence (rahmah) and grace ([barakah](#)) above and beyond the normal greeting to people.

Attan
Pashto
***An Afghan dance.** It is often performed at weddings.*

Ayah, Ayat
Arabic
***Literally a Sign of Allah.** It applies to any perceivable aspect of creation, but used most often specifically to mean a “verse,” in the Holy [Qur'an](#), all of whose verses are also considered divine Signs of Allah.*

Azaan; adhaan
Arabic
***The call to prayer.** Generally it is issued through loudspeakers in modern times to call a neighborhood to the prayer at a [masjid](#). Although Muslims also have various optional prayers they can perform throughout a day or night, the azaan is only issued for the five obligatory prayers according to most [Sunni](#) traditions.*

Badal (Pashtunwali)
Pashto
***Literally a swap or exchange.** It includes, but is not limited to acts of vengeance be they in terms of physical or economic harm to the other party; though always in the spirit of equitability.*

Badragha (Pashtunwali)
Pashto
An armed escort for protecting a traveler or fugitive passing through a tribe or clan's geographic boundary, from enemies in pursuit.

Bahu
Urdu
A daughter-in-law.

Balandra (Pashtunwali)
Pashto
***Cooperation.** Used in the sense where aid is delivered to one who lacks the means to complete a task, such as planting the field. The assisted party typically hosts the providers of assistance with a meal.*

Baraat
Urdu
***The wedding entourage of a groom and his family.** It is customary for the groom to arrive at the place chosen by the bride's family for the wedding ceremony and then depart with the bride back to the home of the groom.*

Barakah
Arabic
***Grace or blessings of Allah.** Generally it is seen in terms of wealth or wellbeing, though strictly it need not be so. It is also the underlying root of the name Barack as in US President Barack Obama.*

Baramta (Pashtunwali)
Pashto
Similar to bota but with hostages taken from the oblige's village.

BDU
Abbr.
***Battle Dress Uniform.** The BDU was worn by the US Army from the mid 1980's onward and was superseded in 2005 by the Army Combat Uniform or ACU.*

Bettha

Urdu

***Son.** The “*tt*h” sound used here is pronounced like an English “*t*” but with the tip of the tongue rolled back until its underside touches the roof of the mouth prior to release of air.*

Bhabhi

Urdu

Sister-in-law.

Bhai

Urdu

***Brother.** Used to mean a blood relation but often used as a respectful address to a friend. More common in the “friend” usage culturally than is the word “brother” as used in western cultures.*

Bilga (*Pashtunwali*)

Pashto

***Being an accessory to a theft.** Generally evidenced by stolen property in one’s possession for which one is held responsible, until or unless he/she makes good the loss, or reveals the source of the stolen property.*

Bismillah, Bismilla-hirrahma- nirraheem

Arabic

***In the name of God.** Muslims commence all endeavors big or small, by saying openly or to oneself, Bismillah. It seeks to ensure that the endeavor is righteous. One could never say this, for example, prior to mugging someone. With the extended reference it is translated as “In the name of God, the beneficent, the caring.” Notably, the latter description is also translated to “the merciful,” though Muslim scholars prefer the more accurate reference to “care” in the idea of “Raheem.”*

Bota (*Pashtunwali*)

Pashto

***Seizure of property in lieu of an obligation.** The seizure is lawfully held until the obligation is discharged. It is similar to a lien but isn’t recorded against specific property.*

Burkha; Burqa

Urdu

***A head-to-toe covering for females.** It represents the most comprehensive form of practice of veiling. Small holes or a mesh in the facial area allow for limited visibility. The “q” sound here is obtained by pressing the part of the tongue that is in the back of the throat against the back wall of the throat before abruptly releasing it without vocal chord action. As such it frequently appears with no “u” sound following it in words of Persi-Arabic origin.*

Chacha, Chachu

Urdu

***Father’s younger brother.** The Chachu form is usually more affectionate.*

Chador

Urdu

***A large usually woolen shawl.** Generally it is worn by men or women as a covering and a protection against the elements.*

Chai

Urdu

Tea.

Charss

Urdu

***A drug.** It comes from the cannabis plant and is traditionally made by hand rubbing the plant leaves but also using other methods.*

Chigha (*Pashtunwali*)

Pashto

A posse formed for pursuit of bandits or raiders that have stolen property.

Chowk

Urdu

A town or city square or major street intersection.

CI

Abbr.

***Comfort Item.** Small items allowed to the detainees at Guantanamo according to their pattern of compliance and cooperation. The more compliant detainees receive more CIs. Only boxer shorts remain if all CIs have been withdrawn. More clothing, flip-flops and board games represent the other end of the spectrum.*

Deobandi

English

***From the teachings of the Darul-uloom school of Deoband, India.** Launched in the 19th century to find a more uncorrupted form of [Islam](#), it has come to be associated with a “puritan” focus on do/don’t behavior and missing much of the spiritual aspect of [Islam](#), but this is an outcome of practice and arguably not its essential teaching or philosophy.*

DRA

Abbr.

***Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.** The name adopted by the communist government before, during, and after the Soviet occupation.*

Du'a

Arabic

***Prayer supplication, specific request of Allah.** Unlike [salaat](#), it does not involve physical action of bowing, prostration and [sajdah](#). It is spoken.*

Dupattha

Urdu

*A **lightweight veil or shawl**. It is worn over the head without covering the face as such. Sometimes drawn far forward to hide the face similarly to the way a deep hood might be drawn forward.*

Durree

Urdu

Floor rug made from thick fabric of cotton.

‘Eid-ul-Fitr

Arabic

***Literally, the festival of breaking fast.** It occurs on the first day of the month of Shawwal to celebrate the end of [Ramadhan](#). A small payment of “fitrana,” is due upon every person above the age of puberty which is normally collected at the time of the congregational **‘Eid-ul-Fitr** prayer. The celebration includes dressing in one’s best clothes and visiting friends and family, giving gifts—primarily to children.*

Ezarband

Urdu

***Waist-string.** A length of crocheted cotton or other commonly available fiber used to form a rope-like drawstring to hold up a [shalwar](#) around the waist.*

Fajr

Arabic

***The dawn.** By implication, the dawn prayer.*

Fatiha, Surat-ul-Fatiha

Arabic

***The name of the very first [surah](#) of the Holy Qur’an.** It is also the [suruh](#) that is most commonly recited, being an integral part of each cycle of [salaat](#). It is also recited on behalf of a deceased person, most often upon first learning of the death. The act of such an offered recital is also itself commonly referred to as “performing Fatiha.”*

Fi-amanillah

Arabic

***[Go] In the protection of Allah.** A well-wish for the traveler typically used for long or perilous journeys.*

Fi-sabeelillah

Arabic

***Literally, in the path of Allah.** For the sake of Allah.*

Ghashay

Pashto

Arrow

Ghundi (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

***An alliance.** Usually it is between tribes or clans to serve a mutual interest.*

Gumbad

Persian

***A dome.** Also used to describe a style for woven rugs in which the central motif is patterned after the interior architectural detail of many mosque domes, containing decorated intersecting geodesic lines and spaces between the lines.*

Gulgee

Urdu

***Ismail Gulgee.** An internationally acclaimed Pakistani artist from Peshawar.*

Hadith

Arabic

***A narrative attributing sayings to the Prophet Muhammad ([pbuh](#)).** Usually varying degrees of authentication from very sound to weak are applied to such narratives depending on the nature and circumstance of transmission.*

Halal

Arabic

***Permitted.** It applies to any permitted act such as eating, drinking or earning an income in an Islamically lawful manner. Also applies to permitted things such as foods. Such foods must be inherently halal AND obtained in a halal manner to be considered permitted.*

Halwa

Urdu

A sweet dish made of different types of grains or other vegetables prepared in a typically mashed or paste like form.

Hamsaya (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

***One who seeks the protection of a village elder.** Normally it is in refuge from either indigence or blood feud. The Hamsaya enters the service of the protector.*

Haraam

Arabic

***Forbidden.** It is the opposite of [halal](#) and applies to actions and things that can be acquired or consumed such as income or food. A haraam asset or consumable can never be obtained in a [halal](#) fashion. A [halal](#) item, however, can be obtained in a haraam fashion, which would then make it forbidden.*

Haraamzada

Pashto

***Literally, forbidden-born.** Illegitimate, bastard offspring. It is often used as in English as a denigrating epithet but carries more insult than the equivalent word in English may do today.*

Haram; Haramain; Haramayn

Arabic

***Literally a sanctuary or protected space.** It comes from the triconsonantal root of “h-r-m,” which has meanings of protection, reservation exclusion, and prohibition (see [haram](#)). When rendered as a proper noun, it refers to any of the three Holy Sanctuaries of Makkah ([Masjid](#) al-Haram, the “Sacred Mosque,” which contains the Holy Ka’aba), Medinah ([Masjid](#) al-Nabawi – “Mosque of the Prophet,”) and Jerusalem (Haram-al-Sharif– “The Noble Sanctuary”). A reference to the combination of Makkah and Medinah is usually expressed as al-Haramayn or al-Haramain where the word ending “-ayn,” is a construct for a pair of things, (in contrast with “-een,” which signifies a plurality).*

Henna

English

*A **vegetable dye.** It is dark reddish brown and used to dye hair, skin, and nails in often-elaborate patterns.*

Hezb

Arabic

*A **group or party such as in a political movement.***

Hezb-e-Islami Khalis

Arabic

***Literally meaning the pure party of [Islam](#).** Here it takes the term “khalis,” meaning pure from the name of Younus Khalis whose party it was.*

Hijab

Arabic

***Literally any guarding of modesty: Typically, a head covering in which the face remains uncovered but the hair is completely covered.** As well as its use by large numbers of modern Islamic women, this form of covering most closely resembles the style used by adherent Jewish women and Christian nuns. Likewise, depictions of Mary; mother of Jesus (upon whom be peace), almost always show a hijab.*

Iddah, iddat

Arabic

*A **period of four months and ten days following commencement of widowhood and three months if following divorce.** During this period a woman should not leave the home. Its purpose is generally agreed among scholars to establish paternity in case of a woman being unknowingly pregnant after a divorce or loss of a husband.*

Iftar

Arabic

***The breaking of the fast.** It may be after an obligatory fast in [Ramadhan](#) or at other times when an optional fast is undertaken. Importantly, this term is used exclusively for the proper sunset break of the fast only; and not premature termination.*

Ijaazah

Arabic

***Literally “permission.”** It denotes the permission from a sheikh or ‘[alim](#) that authorizes his/her student to dispense religious knowledge or opinion. It is the basis on which one is titled a sheikh or ‘[alim](#) (feminine: ‘alima) and thereby creates an unbroken chain of transmission for such knowledge dating back to the time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ([pbuh](#)).*

Imam

Arabic

*A **leader.** Commonly; it refers to the one who leads prayers as a matter of routine or just assumes the role on a given occasion.*

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raaji’un

Arabic

***Indeed we are from Allah and indeed to him shall we return.** Verse 156 of Surat-ul-Baqara in the Holy [Qur’an](#). This is normally recited upon a calamity or catastrophe occurring in which a Muslim suffers. It has come to be used almost exclusively for when learning of a Muslim’s death. Strictly however, it should be uttered for any worry or calamity befalling a Muslim.*

InshaAllah

Arabic

***If it be the will of Allah.** Very frequently used to qualify any prediction whose outcome is desirable to indicate that control of any outcome is always in God’s hands. Culturally; it has come to be seen as an opting out of responsibility for an action ahead of time and often presages a likely failure to achieve a goal or task.*

Isha

Arabic

***The evening prayer.** The last of the five daily prayers.*

ISI

Abbr.

***Inter-Services Intelligence.** A Directorate of the Pakistani Intelligence services and the largest of Pakistan’s three intelligence services.*

Islam

Arabic

***The way of life practiced by Muslims.** Literally meaning peaceful and complete submission, in this case to the Will of Allah. It has the same tri-consonantal proto-Semitic root of “s-l-m,” from which the cognates “[salaam](#),” and the Jewish “shalom,” are derived.*

Itbar (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

***Trust.** The basis for dependency on any verbal agreement made in front of a [jirga](#) or other witnesses.*

Itwar

Urdu

Sunday:

Jahannam

Arabic

***The Muslim concept of hell.** A place and/or state of enduring torment.*

Jahez
Urdu
<i>The collection of gifts of money, jewelry, clothes or other useful items given by parents to a daughter for her marriage. Customary; but not an Islamic requirement, it has gradually become an expectation by groom’s families and has widely become seen as a “bride price.” Parents typically start assembling a jahez when a daughter is born and add to the collection over the years before a daughter’s marriage.</i>
Jahil
Arabic
<i>Ignorant, uneducated. It refers to ignorance in a manner typically incorporating the idea of tacit acceptance of such a state. I.e. not blissfully ignorant but willfully so.</i>
Jahiliyyah
Arabic
<i>Originally referring to the era preceding the arrival of Islam. It describes a culture that willfully shunned the pursuit of truth and knowledge. It is sometimes used today by some extreme Salafists (such as members of al-Qaeda) to criticize a collectively heedless state of mainstream Muslims. Mainstream Muslim scholars resoundingly refute this assertion.</i>
Jamaat
Arabic
<i>A physical gathering or party. It can mean not only a political party similar to hezb, but also the physical gathering as where Muslims line up for prayer.</i>
Jannah
Arabic
<i>Paradise. Literally; this word means a garden and is used here in close parallel to how “Garden of Eden” is used in western culture.</i>
JazaakAllah, JazaakAllah Khayr
Arabic
<i>May Allah reward you. A form of thanks to an individual. With Khayr or Khayran, it adds the qualifier “well.”</i>
Jazaakumullah
Arabic
<i>The same as JazaakAllah but referring to a plurality of people who are being thanked.</i>
Jihad; Jehad
Arabic
<i>Any of four major categories of striving – (a) in self discipline against one’s base desires, (b) of the hand (non-military actions), (c) of the tongue (use of argument), and (d) of the sword (military). Though the latter use is a legitimate one, (much as notions of a “just-war,” are articulated in non-Muslim circles), a war as such is better translated as “harb,” in Arabic. Indeed, a holy war would be a “harbun-mutaqaddisun,” combining “harb” for war and “quddoos,” from the tri-consonantal “q-d-s,” for “holy.”</i>
Jilbab
Arabic
<i>A long loosely fitting coat. It is worn over outerwear to cover a woman’s more decorative dress and to direct unwanted attention away from the shape or figure of the woman dressed as such.</i>
Jirga
Pashto
<i>A council of elders. In a village or potentially larger administrative area among Pashtuns. Jirgas frequently dispense justice.</i>
Jumu’ah
Arabic
<i>Friday. It is based on the root meaning of togetherness since Friday is a day of congregation.</i>
Salaat-ul-Jumu’ah
Arabic
<i>The Friday congregational prayer.</i>
Jumma
Urdu
<i>Friday and by implicit reference, the Friday mid-day prayer. It is derived from the Arabic “jumu’ah.”</i>
Jumma Bazaar
Urdu
<i>A bazaar normally open for Friday typically after Friday prayer.</i>
Kafir; Kaafir
Arabic
<i>One who denies or conceals truth and especially the truth of the one-ness of God. The element of concealing is central to its meaning coming from the root “kufr”—concealment. It is also a cognate of the English word “cover.” It has come to be used to refer to unbelievers.</i>
Kalay; Kili
Pashto
<i>Village.</i>
Kalimah
Arabic
<i>Verbal declaration. From the tri-consonantal “k-l-m” —“speak,” it means a saying or spoken motto, but refers to one of five specific pronouncements made by Muslims as articles of faith. The most prominent of which, the “tayyabah,” is: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.”</i>
Kebab
Urdu

A ground or minced meat dish. It is made by grilling, roasting or stewing the meat.

Khan

Pashto

*Honorific referring originally to peoples of Turkic or Mongol warrior origin. Very widely used as tribal identity of a **Pashtun** or **Pathan**. In modern usage, it often appears as a last name when aligned to a western norm for naming. The vast majority of **Pashtuns** bear this name as an ethnic identity—including this book’s author. It is occasionally used to emphasize ethnicity out of respect and is often delivered in the form “Khan **sahib**,” when addressing one who is a **Pashtun**. The “kh” sound is pronounced most similarly to the “ch” in the Scottish word “loch.”*

Khel

Pashto

*A clan. A subgroup of a **Zai** or **Pashtun tribe**. Due to relative immobility in mountain country, khels have often emerged as confined in single villages and the word has increasingly come to mean “village,” in like fashion to **“kalay”** and **“kili.”***

Khidmat

Arabic

Service.

Khowr

Pashto

A daughter of a sister; niece; “Sister-friend.” It may be as in a sorority or between close female friends but not lesbian.

Khussa

Urdu

An ornate slipper. Usually it has a curly pointed toe end. Unlike most transliterations, here it is pronounced without conjoining the “k” and the “h” and in fact most westerners would pronounce it correctly with no guidance.

Lashkar (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

*An armed group or militia. In **Pashtunwali** it is formed for a mission such as enforcement, usually assembled and authorized by a **jirga**.*

Lehenga

Urdu

Ankle-length full skirt typically worn on weddings or special occasions.

Lokhay Warkawal (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

Offering a sacrifice or gift to a stronger tribal entity in return for protection. This can also apply at the level of individuals. An offering (Lokhay) is made and the accepting entity is bound to protect the one requesting protection.

Maalik

Urdu

Owner.

Madrassah

Arabic

A place of intermediate learning. A school where lectures are a predominant form of knowledge transfer. The term has come to emblemize rote-learning schools, but this is a recent development, and has become a western cultural stereotype.

Maghrib; maghreb

Arabic

The West geographically and politically. The place where the sun sets. Sunset. The shorter reference to “salaat-ul-maghrib” or the sunset prayer. As with the Jewish faith, sunset marks the start of a new day in an Islamic calendar.

Maktab

Arabic

A place where written work takes place and by implication, an office, a primary school, or even a library. The word is very generally applied by context and may even include simply meaning “desk.”

MashAllah

Arabic

Whatever Allah wills. It acknowledges that any good outcome is the will of Allah and is used to prevent the interpretation of an inflated sense of personal or human responsibility for a positive outcome.

Masjid

Arabic

*Literally a place of **sajdah** (see below), or place of worship. A mosque.*

Maulwi

Urdu

A title honorific given to an Islamic scholar or ‘alim.

Maulana

Urdu

Literally our master or lord but referring to a human master or lord, never a divine one. It applies to a person of significant religious authority often seen as such by several generations.

Meerata (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

*A crime of systematic assassination of the male members of a family for the specific objective of eliminating lineage and rights of inheritance. It is met with strong retribution unless a payment of compensation is made. This can be money in the form of what is called **Saz** or **Swara**. The **Jirga** is used to mediate such moves and if the victims’ family accepts the **Saz** or **Swara**, then the perpetrators are free of all claims.*

Mehr

Arabic

The Islamic concept of a financial right accruing to the bride in a marriage, which becomes obligatory for the groom to pay the bride in the event of a divorce or otherwise upon demand. This stands in contrast to the common practice of [jahce](#), which often results in the groom and/or his family seeking financial benefit from the bride and/or her family. When excessive, this is often termed a “bride price.” In most mainstream Pakistani Muslim practice, both the mehr and a modest [jahce](#) of usually clothing and jewelry are commonplace.

Mehram

Arabic

A relationship between sexes where marriage would be impermissible such as between father and daughter. Non-mehram relationships are those where a marriage would, on the grounds of the relationship per se, be permissible. A woman should be veiled before a non-mehram man. A man should avoid prolonged eye contact with a non-mehram woman. The degree to which this is practiced varies throughout the Islamic world.

Melmasthia (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

The required behavior toward anyone who is a guest or who is seeking protection of another. It is a serious dishonor to allow a protected guest to be harmed. Such guests can often include personal enemies but who have nonetheless requested protection.

Mere bhai!

Urdu

My brother! A term of warmth and endearment used between good friends. The word [bhai](#) has a broader reach than the blood-relation “brother” in English. It is also more informal than use of “brother” in English when referring to a fraternity as in an association or society.

Miswaak

Arabic

A twig of the arak, peelu or Salvadora persica tree whose peeled bark reveals a stiff bristly core that is used as a toothbrush. It has been used since ancient times. Among Muslims it is significant since it was used and recommended by the Prophet ([pbuh](#)).

Mla Tarr (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

Taking up the cause of an injured party usually against an outsider.

Mubarak

Arabic

To be blessed or graced. Typically offered to others to say, “May your good news be blessed” as in ‘Eid-Mubarak (A blessed ‘Eid) or Shaadi-Mubarak (May your marriage be blessed). It comes from the same root as [barakah](#) (grace).

Mujahid, Mujahideen

Arabic

One who is striving in any of the four kinds of [jihad](#). Plural form is mujahideen but in a western cultural context as with [Taliban](#), the plural is often used adjectivally to describe a singular individual.

N'zhowr

Pashto

Daughter-in-law.

Naan

Urdu

Flat bread baked in a brick oven by placing the dough against the walls of the oven.

Nanewatai (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

Forgiveness of repentant enemies. Reconciliation.

NIFA

Abbr.

National Islamic Front for Afghanistan. One of several prominent [mujahideen](#) groups organized to fight communist rule and later Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Nihari

Urdu

A meat dish usually served at breakfast time and made from beef shanks and spices.

Nikkah; nikah

Arabic

Literally a joining or coming together to make whole. In common usage it refers to a Muslim marriage ceremony. The legal form of a Muslim marriage.

Niyyah

Arabic

An intention. In [Islam](#), all innocence and guilt stem from intent. Niyyah refers to one’s intention. Most sins that occur as inadvertent infractions are not considered sins unless the ignorance was unreasonably present. Even so, repentance is a necessary and appropriate response.

NWFP

Abbr.

North West Frontier Province. One of four provinces of Pakistan, with capital Peshawar. Recently, amid controversy, it has been renamed to “Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.”

Paan

Urdu

A betel leaf folded up and containing stuffing to be chewed. The stuffing may be of fennel or other forms of flavor, including tobacco according to tastes.

Paan shop

Urdu

A shop serving up [paans](#) in a variety of formulations. Very common throughout Pakistan and often a focal point for gossip and socializing in a manner analogous to a western bar but usually on a much smaller scale.

Pakhtun

Pashto

***Same as Pashtun.** A large ethnic group covering mostly eastern Afghanistan and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. The “kh” form is applicable to northern tribal pronunciations while the “sh” form is normally used in southern parts. For simplicity, the narrative sticks with the easier to pronounce “sh” form.*

Pakol

Pashto

*A **woolen cap**. Made in the form of a long cylinder with a single open end, whose walls are rolled up to create a brim that grips the side of the head.*

Paratthha

Urdu

***Thin bread made by folding butter into the flour dough before rolling it flat for cooking.** The second “h” is aspirated and distinct from the “tth” consonant.*

Partition

English

***The event that created Pakistan on August 14th 1947, at the end of British rule over India.** The following day, after Pakistan was formed, the modern country of India was given its own independence.*

Pashto

Pashto

The language of the Pashtuns.

Pashtun

Pashto

Same as Pakhtun.

Pashtunwali

Pashto

***An elaborate system of tribal law and societal custom.** It is codified into several aspects, dealing with property, dispute resolution, treatment of strangers, protection of victims, and many other areas of law and order. It is generally agreed that this system has been in place for over 2,000 years and predates [Islam](#) in Afghanistan.*

Pathan

Urdu

***Pashtun in Urdu/Hindi.** The south Asian name for **Pashtun**.*

Patthra

Urdu

***A low wooden platform stool.** Typically it is about ten centimeters off the floor held up by two short vertical planks as legs and a top plank as a seating surface.*

Pbuh or (pbuh)

Abbr.

***Peace Be Upon Him.** A salutation and prayer asking for the peace and blessings of Allah to be visited upon Muhammad (pbuh), the Holy Prophet of [Islam](#). It is considered rude or ill-mannered to fail to offer such a prayer upon the mention of his name or personage. In the written form, it is usually abbreviated thus.*

Pooree

Urdu

A thin fried bread often eaten together with [halwa](#).

Qamees

Arabic

An upper garment like a shirt or blouse at the top but extending typically up to or over the knees.

Qasr

Arabic

***The offering of one of the normal prayers in a shortened fashion as permitted when traveling.** Customarily the midday prayer and the afternoon prayer can also be combined when they are thus shortened. Likewise, the sunset and nighttime prayers may be combined under the same circumstances.*

Qiyaamah

Arabic

***The end of days.** The end of the world. The day of Resurrection. The day of Judgment.*

Qazi; Qadhi

Arabic

A judge or one who administers matters of justice such as a justice of the peace might do. This role is the one called upon to conduct marriage ceremonies.

Qiblah

Arabic

At any point on earth, the direction that would face the Ka'aba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

Qur'an, Holy Qur'an

Arabic

***Literally, the Recitation.** It refers to the directly revealed divine word of God through the medium of the Prophet Muhammad's ([pbuh](#)) utterances while in a state of receiving revelation. It was more than a simple intellectual*

process of explanation. It was rather a process of independently placing utterances directly into the lips, tongue and vocal chords of the Prophet ([pbuh](#)), while infusing his mind and spirit with the total recall and understanding of what had been uttered. The focus on recitation refers to the medium being most essentially verbal even though the content has been captured in written form. It is also why Muslims attach great significance to reciting the Holy [Qur'an](#) and not simply reading it silently.

Ramadhan; Ramadan; Ramzan

Arabic

The Muslim holy month during which fasting is prescribed for all non-traveling, non-infirm, non-menstruating Muslims above a certain age. Fasting is from before dawn to sunset. It is the month during which the Holy [Qur'an](#) was first revealed and the revelation requiring fasting is to be found in [Surah](#) 2, verse 183: **“O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) God consciousness.”** Fasts that have been excused for the above reasons are to be made up as soon as conveniently possible as and when the reasons no longer apply. Abstinence during fasting is from all ingestible substances, smoking, drinking, food, and sexual activity.

Ramadhan Mubarak

Arabic

Wishes of blessings upon another Muslim on the start of and during Ramadhan.

RFID

Abbr.

***Radio Frequency Identification Device.** A very small microchip that can be incorporated into most products or product packaging to enable ready signaling of product identity, location, and other information when the tag is irradiated with usually nearby radio waves.*

Riba

Arabic

***Literally, an increase. Used exclusively to refer to interest or usury in the financial sense.** Receipt or payment of riba is considered [haram](#) in [Islam](#), and this position is the basis for all appropriately scholar-qualified Islamic finance offerings.*

Rickshaw; Ricksha

Urdu

A powered three-wheeled conveyance with a single seat for the driver and a small bench for two or three passengers at the rear with minimal baggage space. Originally, a two-wheeled cart enabling a human runner to transport up to three passengers short distances by holding two long pole-like arms at a point neutrally balanced over the large main wheels of the cart. Subsequently, designs switched to tricycles driven by sprocket-and-chain drives and pedals, but still man-powered. Finally, powered vehicles emerged during the 1960s.

RPG, RPG-7

Abbr.

***Rocket Propelled Grenade.** (Version 7 with the added designation). A high explosive device, often involving a shaped charge to generate a high energy focused jet of gas and liquid metal that pierces armor. It is typically launched from a shoulder-mounted tube, and is effective against armored vehicles such as main battle tanks or armored personnel carriers.*

Sabaz, Sabz

Urdu

Green, as in the greenery of vegetation.

Sabaz chai

Urdu

Green tea.

Sahib

Urdu

Sir, Mister. Used as an honorific. A mark of respect.

Sajdah

Arabic

Prostration with the forehead, nose, palms, knees and toes touching the ground in worship. Forbidden for all Muslims except toward Allah.

Salaam

Arabic

***Peace. The peace greeting.** From the proto-Semitic tri-consonantal form of “s-l-m,” which means safe or whole without breakage or damage. The infinitive form in Arabic is **“Islam,”** which describes a state more than the effects of the state—in this case, a state of peaceable acceptance of God’s will and command.*

Salaat

Arabic

Ritual prayer that must be performed according to guidelines governing ritual purity, posture, state of mind, and recitation.

Salaat-ul-fajr, zuhr, asr, maghrib, isha

Arabic

Each of the prayers of the day are fully described by adding the prefix “salaat-ul-...” in front of the specific prayer as in salaat-ul-maghrib. However, normal usage often drops the prefix.

Salafism, Salafi

English

A [Sunn](#)i sub-sect of [Islam](#). Adherents seek to practice [Islam](#) in strict accord with the manner of its practice by the first three generations of Muslims—the “salaf.” It looks for literal acceptance of scripture and avoids an interpretive approach. Salafi is one who practices Salafism. It is often associated with a shunning of modernity insofar as it leads to deviation but such a position is not inherent to Salafism.

Salafist

English

*A term describing any of several movements seeking political change who are alleged to base their motivations on Salafi principles. Such groups are said to include al-Qaeda. Virtually no scholars within the **Salafi** branch of [Islam](#) endorse the unauthoritative declaration of [jihad](#) and the seemingly callous killing involved in terrorism. Neither do they pronounce [takfir](#) on their fellow Muslims as various Salafist organizations are alleged to do.*

Saz (Pashtunwali)

Pashto

***Compensation for causing wrongful death.** Offered by those acting on behalf of perpetrator(s) to the surviving relatives of victim(s) via a [jirga](#) and only if acceptable, will it absolve the perpetrator. Saz may be in the form of money or other things of value. It may also be in the form of [swara](#) (see below).*

Shahadah

Arabic

The act of testifying. Describes both the taking of the oath to accept [Islam](#), and an act of martyrdom. The latter is itself an act of testimony to the true articles of faith. The essential quality of the martyr is neither the death itself nor the simple commitment to a cause, but the belief driving such commitment being complete and without doubt. A majority of [Sunni](#) scholars generally hold that suicidal combat—where the suicide itself is the instrumentality of the combat—is not ordinarily permissible. On the other hand, a certain death but inflicted by the action of opponents, while potentially describable as “suicide,” is permissible. Suicidal (or non-suicidal) actions that target non-combatants are also not permissible and there is no theory of collective responsibility applicable to an entire population (e.g. including babies) for the wrongdoing of its leaders. There are no documented cases of the Prophet Muhammad ([pbuh](#)) leading or condoning suicide missions, nor sanctioning the slaying of non-combatants, but there are several cases to the contrary.

Shaheed

Arabic

A martyr. One who has died in [shahadah](#) fighting an unjust opponent or resisting one. Most generally the death occurs in the fulfillment of any religious commandment in which the effort is driven by strength of faith in [Islam](#). The first shaheed in all [Islam](#) was a woman called Sumayyah bint Khayyat.

Shalwar

Urdu

A baggy pant. It is tied around the waist with an [ezarband](#) and worn such that the waist and upper portions are hidden under the knee length [qamees](#).

Sherwani

Urdu

A long coat. Usually it has a tight collar without a lapel, fastened over the throat and several buttons down the top two thirds of its length. It is often ornate and embroidered and worn ceremoniously.

Shinwari

Pashto

A tribe of predominantly northeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan.

Spin

Pashto

White.

Spin Ghar

Pashto

White Mountains.

SSG

Abbr.

Special Services Group. An elite special operations commando force of the Pakistan military; similar to the US Army's Delta Force or British SAS.

SubhanAllah

Arabic

Literally God is void of all other things. This means God is void of dependency or evil. It use is to glorify God's work or acts as when seeing something remarkable.

Suhur

Arabic

The meal taken before dawn when it is still dark enough to eat during the month of [Ramadhan](#). By instruction directly from the Holy [Qur'an](#), it is supposed to be completed before it is possible to discern a black thread from a white one in natural twilight.

Sunnah

Arabic

Any act of the Prophet Muhammad ([pbuh](#)). The body of knowledge comprising the acts, sayings and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad ([pbuh](#)). The importance of cataloging this knowledge stems directly from the Holy [Qur'an](#), which declares that the Prophet ([pbuh](#)) was the best example of right behavior.

Sunni

Arabic

One who attaches importance to guidance from the Holy [Qur'an](#) for categoric instruction supplemented by the [Sunnah](#) to understand details of how to carry out the instructions of the Faith.

Surah; Sura

Arabic

A chapter or segment of the Holy [Qur'an](#). Each surah has a name, which it typically takes from a word or [ayah](#) in one of its verses.

Swara

Pashto

The offering in marriage of a girl of a family of a perpetrator of wrongful death—such as in meerata—to the family of the victim(s) in lieu of [sar](#) (blood money).

Tablighi Jamaat

Urdu

A party that proselytizes for religious reawakening of Muslims throughout the world. It is a non-affiliated apolitical movement and is targeted largely toward Muslims to bring them closer to their own faith. It is avowedly pacifist.

Tafsir

Arabic

Commentary or exegesis of the Holy [Qur'an](#). The act of interpreting but in non-mystical ways the meaning of the Holy [Qur'an](#).

Takbeer

Arabic

The call to recognize, acknowledge, and pronounce the greatness of God. Almost always to spur a group of people to call out “Allahu Akbar”—God is Great.

Takfir, Takfiri	
Arabic	
<i>To pronounce Kufr on someone. To declare a person to be a <i>Kafir</i>. Orthodox <i>Islam</i> frowns upon this practice carried out upon a fellow Muslim once he/she has professed the articles of faith. Takfir is one of the primary forms of justification of carrying out terrorist acts and such people also depart from orthodox <i>Islam</i> in the interpretation of suicide as a legitimate means of military action. They believe that this does result in <i>shahadah</i>—something contradicted by all orthodox Muslim scholars. “Takfiri,” is one who engages in takfir.</i>	
Talib	
Arabic	
<i>Student. In <i>Pashto</i>, the plural is Taliban. The body of “students” that became a political movement of Afghanistan. Increasingly in western discourse, the label has also come to be applied to singular individuals as in "He is a [member of the] Taliban.”</i>	
Tandoor	
Urdu	
<i>A clay oven.</i>	
Taraweeh	
Arabic	
<i>Special prayer during the evenings of Ramadhan. It focuses on recitations of the Holy <i>Qur'an</i> usually resulting in the entire <i>Qur'an</i> being recited over the roughly thirty nights of the month.</i>	
Tarr (<i>Pashtunwali</i>)	
Pashto	
<i>A mutual agreement or contract usually governing acts or prohibiting them by mutual arrangement. Violation of the agreement exposes the violator with no recourse if he/she suffers harm from the violated party.</i>	
Tashahud; Tashahhud	
Arabic	
<i>The seated phase of a Muslim prayer. The posture is one of sitting on one’s legs with knees fully bent and hands resting on the upper thighs just above the knees.</i>	
Teega (<i>Pashtunwali</i>)	
Pashto	
<i>A truce, cease-fire, cessation of hostility. It does not require resolving the underlying cause of a dispute. Breaking the truce invites punitive measures from the <i>jirga</i>.</i>	
Tor (<i>Pashtunwali</i>)	
Pashto	
<i>Gender propriety. For example, prohibition of men touching women or girls to whom they are not married or not <i>mehr</i>.</i>	
Tora Bora	
Pashto	
<i>Black Dust. The name given to a region of the <i>Spin Ghar</i> mountains containing a large complex of caves used by <i>mujahideen</i> and al-Qaeda at different times.</i>	
‘Ulema	
Arabic	
<i>Plural of ‘alim. It is also often used to refer to a consensus among scholars over matters of Islamic knowledge and its interpretation.</i>	
Uzr	
Pashto	
<i>An apologetic or sorrowful regret.</i>	
Wā ‘alaykum assalaam	
Arabic	
<i>And upon you be peace. Traditional response for a Muslim to whoever is offering <i>salaam</i> when meeting or starting a reply to a letter/email. Often in written form abbreviated to “WAS.”</i>	
W’Allahi; Wallahi	
Arabic	
<i>By God. By Allah. Often to emphasize commitment to a point, comment or position that the speaker is taking.</i>	
Wāhabi; Wāhhabi	
Arabic	
<i>One who is guided by the teachings of 18th Century scholar Ibn Abdul Wahhab. He preached a puritan ultra-conservative form of <i>Islam</i>.</i>	
Walimah	
Arabic	
<i>The part of an Islamic wedding ceremony that takes place typically a day after the formal marriage and arranged by the groom's side of the family. Many scholars suggest that it should only be performed after consummation.</i>	
Wānd-yaar	
Pashto	
<i>Sister-in-law.</i>	
Wāsalaam	
Arabic	
<i>“...and peace.” A return of a greeting often at the end of a letter, before the signature line in a Muslim’s correspondence.</i>	
Wudhu	
Arabic	
<i>The lesser ablution. A ritual purification through washing before any prayer.</i>	

Yā Allah
Arabic
Oh Allah. A direct appeal to Allah. Oh God.

Yā Allah! Shukr!
Urdu
Oh Allah! Thanks be to thee! Thank God!

Yāar
Urdu
Term of endearment to a fellow male friend. Used similarly to “dude,” in common American slang.

Yusufzai; Yousufzai
Pashto
A very large tribe of the Pashtuns, mostly residing in Pakistan's NWFP.

Zai
Pashto
The generic term for a tribe of the Pashtuns.

Zuhr
Arabic
The mid-day prayer.

Zwey
Pashto
A term of endearment to mean "Son," in [Pashto](#).

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References

References have been very important in getting as much of the contextual detail to be as authentic as I could make it. The following have been some of the more prominent references from which I have drawn, but please note, to all polemicists, the references are used for the purposes of contextualizing a fictional narrative and it is not my objective to opine on the accuracy of their content or otherwise. They have helped create the backdrop for a human story, not a political one, and one would be ill-advised to treat this book as a source of reference material on history.

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Born in Pakistan in 1952 of refugee parents from India, M. Salahuddin Khan is a management consultant. From 1998 to 2007, he was the Senior VP and Chief Technology Officer, and Senior VP of Global Marketing and Strategy for NAVTEQ Corp. From 2006 to 2008, he was publisher of *ISLAMICA Magazine*.

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In less than a year, *Sikander* has been the Grand Prize winner of the 2011 Los Angeles Book Festival and the 2011 Paris Book Festival, winner in the fiction category at the 2011 Beach and 2011 Hollywood Book Festivals, and was the runner-up in the same category for the 2011 New York Book Festival. *Sikander* was also named the winner in the multi-cultural fiction category at the 2011 National Indie Excellence Book Awards. It was also nominated for the Dayton Literay Peace Prize for 2011. Khan was also awarded the CAIR Chicago Book Award for 2012.

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